A man with dark hair and a serious expression is leaning against a large tree trunk. He is wearing a black, open shirt that reveals his chest. The background is a soft-focus green field.

A knight always
keeps his vows...

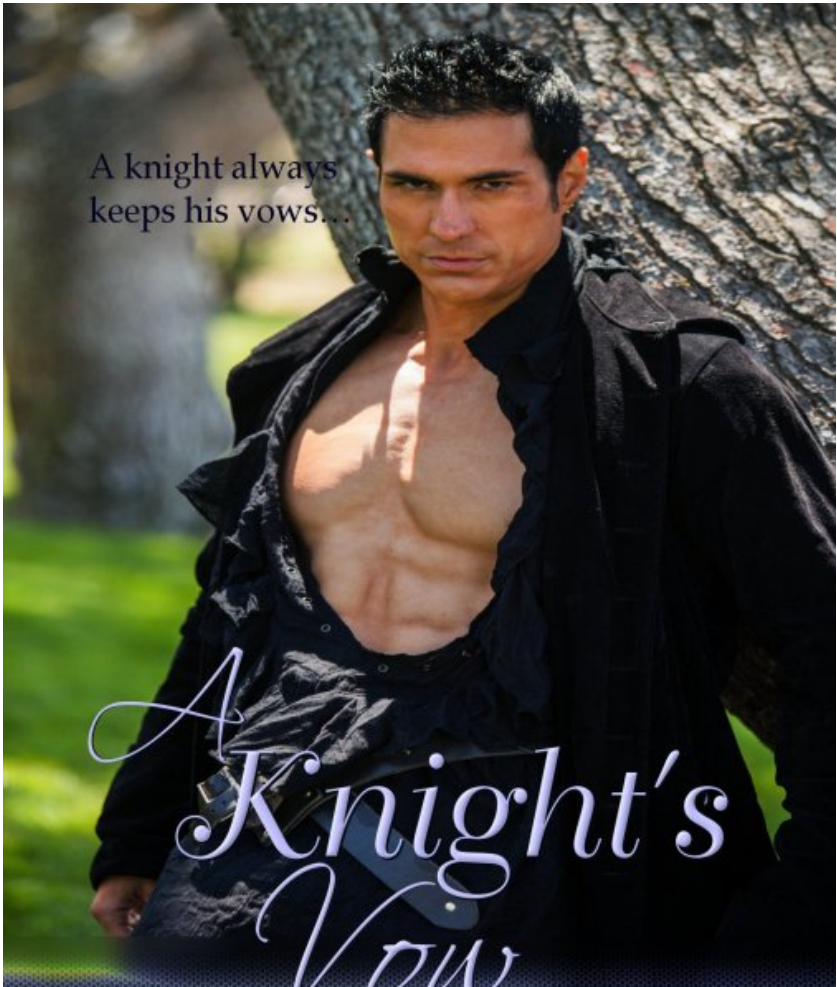
A Knight's Vow



USA Today Bestselling Author

Aliyah Burke



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A Knight's Vow
By
Aliyah Burke

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents who never stopped encouraging me to follow yet another dream. To my readers who waited so long for the rewrite to come out once more. To DH, I can't thank you enough. Love you! And as always, last but never least, to the men and women who sacrifice so much to protect our country. God Bless. May you come home soon and safe!

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Chapter One

Is there another life?

*Shall I awake and find all this a dream? There
Must be, we cannot be created for this sort of suffering.*

-Keats

America

The morning was picture perfect in its glory of a sunrise, colors striking across the land as if shot from a kaleidoscope, immersing the grounds in a breathtaking glow. Dew sparkled like diamonds as the sun hit, burning the morning fog slowly away. The backdrop of regal mountains presented complete silence, as if they, too, foresaw something momentous was about to happen.

At the moment, twenty-eight-year-old Katrina Lawson—Kit to family and friends—lay stretched out on her stomach, overlooking the large herd of horses grazing on the plateau. Her focus trained on her now four-year-old stallion, Ares. Three and a half years ago, she'd had him flown in from Denmark and released him to run with the horses her parents raised. Now, it was time to get him back. He was her pride and joy.

One of her dreams had always been to show and breed Friesians. Now, with Ares, she had a chance to make her dream a reality. The fact he had been raised running throughout the mountains only added to her desire. She'd wanted her horse to be mountain raised as her parents' Morgans were. At intermittent times over the past years, she'd roped him to make sure he knew her scent. Then, she released him, again.

Kit slowly backed up and rose before mounting her cutting horse. Another fine example of horseflesh, his burnished coat shone, a magnificent blue roan Morgan gelding. He was quality proof of her parents' stock. She rode around, blocking the herd's escape and went in at a run.

As Kit had expected, Ares came to defend the herd. While he wasn't the herd's top stallion, she understood this group of horses well enough to understand how he would react. Her stallion would face the threat while the leader would guide the mares somewhere else. She'd had utter confidence he would assist in protecting the herd. She released a well-aimed rope to land around his strong neck. With only a slight amount of strain on her part, she had him

where she wanted him. After waiting for him to begin to accept the rope and ensuring he wouldn't attack her gelding, Kit returned to the ranch her prize in tow.

When she rode into the main part of her parents' ranch, Kit saw her parents standing by the corral where Ares was going to be housed until he was at least green broke. Her mother, Halla Ebony Lawson, who'd taught her the martial art, capoeira, from the time she could walk, and her father, Kevin Victor Lawson, who'd placed her on the back of her first horse.

Her parents had an extremely successful business, and she had grown up with unconditional love and support from them both. Her heart swelled as she saw them waiting for her, pride evident on their faces at her accomplishment.

She released Ares in the corral and left, closing the gate behind her, then dismounted with a smile on her face. Clapping her on the back, her father met her gaze. Love and admiration swam in eyes of quicksilver—ones that were mirror images of her own. "Well done, baby girl."

He took the horse's reins leading him away, leaving her alone with her mother. Kit looked down into soft doe brown eyes.

"Gorgeous, isn't he?" Kit asked, even though she knew the answer.

Ares was coal black and shone like he had just been polished, giving off a bluish hue in the late morning sun. His muscles flowed with precision with each move he made as he pranced and snorted around the enclosure. His unhappiness obvious to all who laid eyes upon him.

"We're so proud of you, Kit honey. He'll be a great horse for you. Just look at him, so proud and so strong. He's so full of spirit." Wistfulness spilled from the gentle voice. Her mother hadn't been able to ride as much as she once had. Kit understood it was hard since her parents dealt with the selling and exporting of horses and cattle all over the world. Plus, her mom loved to ride.

αβ

Kit stared at where she'd hung her linguistics degree on the wall of her temporary room. Eventually, it would be on the wall of her office in her home, but that was currently being built, so she was staying with her parents until the construction had finished.

Stepping close, she readjusted it then again moved back. Languages had always been a love of hers. History also held some

interest, so Kit had studied Latin, Gaelic, Russian, French, Spanish, Italian, Swahili, and Greek. Between her parents, they could speak most with her, as well. Now fluent in eight languages, as well as English, she was content. She grinned. For the moment.

Kit was a daydreamer. That was part of the reason she was so interested in the Friesian. The breed, in her eyes, was so beautiful. She stared out the window at Ares. Her horse fit perfectly into the scenery of those very daydreams. She often found herself lost in thought about knights and the code of chivalry. Unfortunately, these days, one did not come across too many true gentlemen. In her experience, chivalry had long since died.

Over the past few months, she and Ares had worked together many hours a day. They'd arrived at the point where she could run in a direction, and with only a whistle, Ares would come after her. When he arrived beside her, she'd grab his mane and swing up on him without him slowing. Then, they would keep on. She grinned, recalling how she'd acquired an uncommon number of bruises while she was learning that maneuver.

Everything she had heard and researched about Friesians was true. There was not a more loyal and friendly breed of horse, in her mind. Although, her parents would probably disagree since they raised and bred Quarter horses and Morgans on the sprawling Wyoming ranch, along with cattle.

She jogged down to the first floor to swipe the saddlebags she'd packed for her camping trip in the mountains. She'd decided to enjoy some alone time with Ares. After a fond farewell to her parents, she swung up on Ares and rode out.

She made camp by a mountain stream and let Ares roam free. She had no fear that he would try to leave, so he didn't need to be hobbled. For a stallion, he was amazingly calm and loyal. Sure, others may argue her position on that, but while they were allowed their beliefs, she, too, was allowed hers.

She made a fire and got comfortable. While her dinner cooked over the fire, she moved to the meadow where she did her evening workout of capoeira. When that was done, she fed herself, made sure Ares was set, and climbed into her bedroll. With him near, she felt safe, for Ares would let her know if anything came close to camp. She fell asleep as the fog rolled into the valley.

αβ

England, 1103

Marcus Quinn, known as Marc to a select few, was the baron of a set of holdings he'd named Blackthorne. He stared out his window and contemplated the unpleasant fact that he needed to get a bride and an heir. His king had been hinting at the fact, for quite a while now.

Marcus hoped that, if he did so quickly, he could choose his own, rather than have one chosen for him. Past the usual age of marriage, he remained unwilling to be tied down with a woman who would lay like ice under him in the bedroom and whine and complain during the day. Marriage—it was a subject he avoided with the utmost fervor.

Marcus left the castle and headed for his stables, lost in thought. He wanted someone who would not be a hardship to live with. Mistresses had long lost any appeal. Sure, he currently maintained one at his castle, but even she had begun to bore him. In the dark recesses of his mind, he realized he wanted someone to love and to be loved in return, something rather unique for a man of his station. Most barons married for an heir but still kept mistresses. They were men, after all, and able to take a woman when and where they wished.

As he brushed down his destrier, Marauder, he thought about having to get another one, soon. Marauder was getting older, and soon, it would be too much for him to carry the combined weight of both Marcus and his armor. It was hard to contemplate since they had been together for a long time and had been through so much. *A new horse, not to mention a bride, this just isn't my day.* Shaking his head, he left the stable, traveling inside after leaving the horse most wouldn't touch if he ordered them to. His stallion was foul tempered, but it worked in his favor. No one could take him, no one could ride him, and on the field of battle, the horse was a weapon himself, striking out at those who got too close.

The next day, Marcus was in the stable before most of his castle had awakened. He needed a ride. The murkiness did not appear it would let up, anytime soon. The air was uncommonly heavy while containing an underlying static vibe to the thick fog it supported. Marcus urged Marauder on but ensured they proceeded at a slower pace. There were cliffs on this part of his land, so while he wished to reach the stream, caution was advisable.

It was the place he went to think and be alone. No squires, no pages, no one aside from him and his horse. No smelly castle,

unkempt men, or female servants trying to catch his eye for an invitation to a tumble with the lord of the castle. No walls to enclose him. Perfect. For a man used to a warrior's life more often than not, the dealings at the castle tended to get annoying.

Marauder tensed beneath him, and Marcus snapped to attention, hand instinctively moving to the hilt of his sword.

At the other end of the clearing he rode through, by the stream, some of the fog had cleared away, leaving him a view—albeit a hazy one—of a magnificent black horse. This horse was like nothing he'd seen before. Built a little narrower than Marauder, yet still containing as much power in his body. Even with the distance between them, Marcus could tell the horse was watching him with fierce concentration.

The horse snorted, arching his neck with pride and total male arrogance while one foreleg pawed angrily at the ground, sending the morning dew flying. The equine's stance was one that showed not only courage but also protection.

Marcus felt his blood pound and realized that this could be a horse for him. No, *the* horse. He may even be more agile than Marauder. His horse, feeling the energy coming off his rider, started blowing and prancing, getting ready for action, for Marauder was not only a warhorse but also a stallion. Marcus made a lasso while he focused his energy on the magnificent black equine in front of him.

Chapter Two

*Some say that the age of chivalry is past, that the
Spirit of romance is dead. The age of chivalry is never past,
So long as there is a wrong left undressed on earth*

-Kingsley

Kit woke to the sound of Ares' whickering. She unwillingly crawled out from the warmth and comfort of her bedroll. Her sweatpants and cutoff sweatshirt offered little protection against the coolness of the morning. Ares had placed himself in front of her, his whole body quivering with tension.

Crap, what's going on out there? Something must have him spooked if he's being this way. Peering underneath his belly through the fading mist, she made out the form of a man sitting on an animal that could easily pass as a warhorse. Just like the ones from days long past. The horse was huge and looked like he had a nasty attitude. *Not that the man seated there looks all that different.* He wasn't small, by any stretch of the imagination. And appeared just as mean.

She shook her head in denial of the sight before her; no one in these mountains had anything close to a horse like that, only some draft horses used for farm work. It didn't appear that the man had even seen her, as Ares claimed all his attention.

Watching the man turn a rope spurred her into action. Regardless of her hesitation to show herself to this man, she wasn't about to lose Ares. Kit rolled quickly to her feet, looking for some sort of weapon to defend both herself and Ares with since she didn't want to shoot him. She found a rock the size of her fist and picked it up.

I could just call out to him. Let him know that Ares is mine.

A battle cry erupted from him, startling her. Deafening and bone chilling, it pushed away all thoughts of talk. The menacing sound rose up from the giant's throat, pierced the air, and momentarily froze her as still as a block of ice. His horse, obviously used to the cry, lunged forward at the sound.

She shouted at Ares, "Run!" Then, placed her body in front of his. By his hesitation, she recognized Ares was torn between protecting her and listening to her order. The newcomers thundered closer, and when she saw the man ready to throw his rope, she

acted.

She whipped the rock at him, and with amazing alacrity, it found its mark. She hit him dead on the wrist of the hand that twirled the rope. He dropped the rope, a curse flowing from his mouth. Then, he focused on her and cursed, again, simultaneously drawing his sword. More men rode into view, appearing from the fog as if by magic—nothing, one moment, then there, the next.

The lead rider yelled for his men to get her horse, and she got scared. Not just for herself, but for Ares, also. She yelled her command, again. Her stallion obviously didn't want to go. However, the men in armor definitely made him nervous—her, as well. She screamed it one more time, praying he would listen. This time, he did, allowing the fog to swallow him up.

The lead man's mount cried out. Ares screamed a retaliatory challenge, from one stallion to another. The noise from hers blared through the mist like a foghorn from a lighthouse, yet Ares was no longer visible.

Kit searched for him with desperate eyes. Suddenly, the fog retreated, like someone had turned on a vacuum, sucking it away in an instant, and she caught a glimpse of him as he ran off the edge of the cliff. Her heart caught in her throat, and her knees wobbled. Tears blinded her as Kit prayed he would be fine, unsure if or when she would see him, again. *Hell, I'm not even sure I'll survive what I'm about to about to face.*

With Ares gone, she looked to the man thundering toward her, wondering if this wasn't just a dream. This man, a giant of a man with a sword, was coming straight at her. *Oh, this is just too much.* The valley she'd fallen asleep in had disappeared, and she was in an area she didn't recognize, at all. Having grown up in these mountains, she knew them well. Hell, even the mountains were gone.

Her limbs weren't cooperating. The man was in front of her, sword drawn, blade aimed directly at her throat. If a blade could talk, this one wanted to taste her blood.

The horse he was on was even bigger up close, mean, too. His eyes rolled, and he stomped his feet. His large head snaked forward to bite her, and she jumped back.

Damn horse. That animal is fast.

Marcus had taken a sharp breath, aware the rest of his men had done so, as well, when they watched the magnificent horse run to

the edge of the cliff and launch himself off. Swinging his gaze back to the person at the tip of his blade, he saw gray eyes glistening with unshed tears. He wasn't pleased, either, for he hated the waste of a good horse. *I didn't see any trappings on the animal; perhaps, it is a wild one. No way it could be for this child.* He, again, descried the person at the point of his sword and recognized it was not a child nor even a man but a woman. A beautiful woman with brown skin, large eyes and full lips.

His heart skipped a few beats as he stared at her. She took his attention. He'd not noticed the outsider previously, aside from a brief glance, since the horse had received the majority of his focus. But, she had it, now. He was impressed with how she'd avoided his horse's bite. Still, she may be a spy.

The woman backed up to her bedroll and started rolling it, valiantly attempting nonchalance. He realized, in that second, she'd accepted her fate. Or was pretending to. He wanted questions answered; that reason alone saved her life. She constantly jerked her gaze around, as if looking for an escape. She wouldn't find one, of that he had confidence. Still, he couldn't explain the feeling within him that made him want to protect her.

Marcus watched as the woman packed up her things quickly and quietly. She was dressed in the manner befitting a man—leggings and a tunic of sorts. Not sure what to make of this, he motioned for her to come closer with a wave of his sword. She hesitated then moved.

"What is your name? What are you doing here? Why are you dressed like that? What was that horse doing near you?" Marcus asked. "Come over here. Do you speak English?"

One of his knights—a whipcord thin man with a hawk-like nose perched on a pale face—came over. Marcus noted how her expression narrowed as Roger neared neared, even as her eyes flicked between them, before she summarily dismissed his man and focused solely on Marcus.

"Where do you want her to ride, Marcus...my lord? One of the men could take her."

"She rides with me, Roger. Someone else can take her bag. We leave now."

At the use of "my lord", Marcus noticed her expression started.

"I will ride with you of my own accord, but I keep my bag"

She licked her lips, brushed past Roger, and walked over to

Marcus. His chest tightened, and he frowned in response to the emotion that slammed him when he witnessed the fear she wasn't able to completely hide from him. Roger didn't matter to her; that was obvious by her attitude.

He arched an eyebrow at her, he stated the obvious. "You speak our language, but your accent is strange. By what name are you called?"

"My name is Katrina, Katrina Lawson. *You*, Marcus, can call me Kit."

He noted Roger's raised eyebrows, aware the cause was her use of his first name. Not many people called him that. In fact, very few did. Most deferred to his title of Baron or called him "my lord". Roger's disbelief sat all over his face, his astonishment that this woman had the gall to do so and with no repercussion. Even his men, who rode with Marcus and had done so for years, rarely called him that. Roger's slipup of it reminded Marcus the man was getting to familiar and assuming liberties he hadn't the right to take.

While surprised at the sound of his given name from her lips, Marcus gave no indication of such. "Let's go, wench. We ride now."

Her expression grew thunderous at his use of the word "wench". He had this unsettling need to nettle her some more and cocked his eyebrow.

"If you dress like that, you can't expect people to treat you any better."

Marcus sheathed his sword and grabbed for her arm to swing her up on the horse, only to find himself grasping air. She'd moved like the wind. There, one second; gone, the next. Marauder sidestepped, not pleased with the ongoing arrangement. Steadying his horse, Marcus once again turned attention to the woman in front of him.

Exotic. He knew of no other word to describe her.

Narrowing his gaze, he held out his hand. He easily read the debate in her eyes. Energy shot through him at the touch of her hand, stunning him, and he was grateful his beard and moustache concealed his reaction. With a glance down at her, he knew she had felt it, also. Her pupils dilated, and her nostrils flared while the argent shade of her eyes darkened. He pulled her up, determined to ignore the visceral reaction in him caused by her.

She barely weighed anything; therefore, it took no effort to lift her to sit before him. Moments after she was up and settled in front

of him, her legs on one side of the horse, he put Marauder in motion. She held herself erect, refusing to lean back into him. Part of Marcus wanted her touch on him, part wanted to know what that enchanting smell was that surrounded her, but he inwardly admired the fact that she could sit his horse so well. Even with her legs on one side. Perhaps that big black was hers, after all. *No, not possible, she was just scared, and that was the reason for her yelling when he found her.* He couldn't explain the rock, though. *Not true, I can. She was defending herself and doing what most women would. Although, once they see I am a knight, they stop fighting. She did no such thing.*

When they rode into the bailey of his holdings, she slid down as soon as they came to a halt, landing lightly on the balls of her feet. She didn't move far from him or his horse but neither did she speak. He noticed her gaze taking in the view, scanning everything there.

He dismounted after staring at the top of her head, and one of the few who could came to take his horse to the stable. He grabbed her arm, realizing that, unlike most of the women he knew or interacted with, there existed a real strength there, and propelled her up the stairs into his keep. Once inside, he sat her on a bench and claimed the chair opposite her, waving away those ones who came to look. She still hadn't spoken a single word.

"You will tell me what I want to know." It was a statement, not a question. It was more command, even, than statement. "Where do you come from? What are you doing here? And, mostly, why are you dressed like a man? What matter of clothing is this?" He indicated her attire with his hand.

She looked down at her body. "What's the matter with my clothes? You're the one dressed like you are at a renaissance festival." She snapped her mouth shut, appearing guilty...almost.

Still unable to place her accent, he responded in kind. "You wear the clothes of a man, and yet, they are like nothing I have ever seen before. Where did you get them? From where do you hail? Why are you garbed as such? From whom do you run?" He made a grab for her bag and found himself only holding air, once again.

"Who are *you*, and what are you planning to do with me?" Her words fell from full lips in a demand.

Roger, who'd lingered near, barked, "You will address him with the proper respect, wench. You will call him 'my lord' if you need to address him."

Marcus observed her stormy gray eyes snap over to Roger as her

gaze raked him. "I call no one 'my lord'; he is not God. I'm neither servant nor slave. Not only that, I only give respect where and when it is due." With an arch of one eyebrow, she narrowed her eyes at Roger and added, "I would advise you to stop calling me a wench. I'm starting to take offense to that word." That said, she turned her head back to Marcus, completely dismissing Roger.

Marcus wasn't sure what to make of her behavior. By all rights, he should punish her for her disrespect.

Marcus witnessed Roger's expression at her treatment of his station, even if she didn't appear to. He knew Roger would have backhanded the woman, and quite honestly, Marcus wasn't sure how he felt about that. He couldn't deny the possessive and protective feelings she created in him. Taking matters onto himself, he dismissed the people from the hall with the wave of a hand.

He wished to have a private word with his *prisoner*. If that was what she was going to be. There was something about her. If she had indeed traveled with that horse, then maybe she could help him find another one like it. His head snapped up at the sound of footsteps coming across the floor. He saw his current mistress moving toward him. He bit back his groan. Apparently, Clarissa didn't feel she needed to leave the hall as everyone else had.

Clarissa was a tiny thing. Small and blonde. Her petite appearance was offset by the haughty manner and way she carried herself, the malice in her eyes as she glanced between him and Katrina.

"Clarissa, what is it? I did not want to be disturbed." Marcus frowned at her as he tried to control his temper. Disobedience was not to be tolerated. *Then, why am I allowing this other woman to get away with it?*

"Marcus, my lord," she purred. "I just wanted to see this new slave you brought home. I heard that she was dark-skinned. Can I have her for my own, please?" She blinked her eyes coquettishly at him.

Marcus looked at the woman who sat across from him and compared her to his mistress. There was something about the dark woman that made Marcus want to protect her in a way he had never felt about his mistress. When Katrina made no response to Clarissa, he assumed that she did not speak French as well as her odd English.

"She is not a slave, servant, or prisoner. She will be my guest for

a while until I have some answers. Make sure you understand, Clarissa, she is *not* at yours to command. Have one of the rooms made for her. The one next to mine,” he added as an afterthought. Marcus debated as to why he wanted her so close, but could not think of any reason. Not that he was willing to admit to.

Clarissa held her tongue but narrowed her eyes, the only display of emotion she allowed. After a small curtsy, she headed off to presumably follow his instruction. He was confident she would do as he’d commanded even if she didn’t agree with his choice. She wanted to be the mistress of his castle. And, for that reason, he knew she couldn’t afford to anger him or make him suspicious of her actions. She couldn’t question him, yet.

Marcus was one of the richest knights in the kingdom. His castle was loaded with treasure and fine items. He had silks and furs and many more luxurious things that he understood Clarissa wished for herself. She loved jewels, and Marcus had a whole room that was filled with gold and jewels of all sizes. He’d heard the rumors that he had more wealth than the king. His castle actually had windows instead of openings covered with tapestries. He understood exactly why she wanted him.

Marcus felt Kit’s intense gaze on him, and it unnerved him in a way he’d not experienced before. There was something about this woman that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. *I want to put my fingers on her. Explore her skin. Discover if it is as soft as I think it is.* Once Clarissa vanished from view, he beckoned Katrina—or Kit as she said to call her—to follow him into a side room on the first floor. With a gesture for her to sit, he went and shut the doors, entrapping the two of them together, causing the tension in the room to vibrate with life and sexual desire. He then stared at her as he lowered his large body into a chair across from her.

Chapter Three

I have a truant been to chivalry

-Shakespeare

Kit did speak French. Although many of the words were different, she could understand. Inwardly, she seethed. A slave? She'd die first. She hadn't been going to give anything away, however, no matter how hard she would have to bite her tongue. She'd wanted to know his response. And, it had shocked her, honestly. She wasn't to be a prisoner, slave, or servant? What was she to be? Better yet, where was she, and how the hell was she going to get home?

She also wasn't sure what this woman's problem was and why she already hated Kit when they'd not even been introduced. Kit struggled to take all of this in.

She was in an old castle or keep, the likes of which she'd only seen in books and movies. More specifically, a medieval castle.

Sweet Bridget, this has to be a dream. I can't believe this.

She wanted to go and look for Ares but knew that, on foot, there was no chance of escape. Yet, anyway. She needed some information, first. And, for that, she kept her mouth shut and waited.

Kit had no clue why he had ordered her in the room next to his. *This entire situation is getting way out of control.* She checked out the man who held her life in his hands and took stock. He stood about seven inches over six feet, towering over her by almost a foot. There was no fat on him, at all. He gave a new meaning to the phrase "all man". *Hell's bells.* His body wasn't scrawny like a lot of tall people she knew, but was heavily muscled, which showed he had worked hard in his life. She imagined that he would weigh in close to three hundred pounds, and all of it was sinfully well toned.

His hair was jet black, so black it boasted blue highlights. His eyes, the color of the rich, vibrant green meadows back home, did something to her belly and nerves. He was a very big man. She told herself that he would be passably...possibly...handsome if he would get rid of the facial hair he had. She detested facial hair any more than scruff. It hid too much. She was lying to herself; he was gorgeous, even with the mustache and beard.

His skin, although darkened by the sun, wasn't the same brownish tan color as her skin but she didn't care. She'd never held

skin color against anyone and wasn't about to start, now. Still, Kit measured him up the way she measured opponents before a martial arts competition, looking for any sign of weaknesses.

Kit held her tongue, expecting him to say something. She was used to the game of hurry up and wait. Of trying to make the other person become uncomfortable and say something first. She knew the game and was good at it. For that reason, despite being anxious to find out, not only where but *when* she was, Kit vowed she would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm.

So, while she waited, she worked some things out in her head. Or tried to. Like, how she'd gone from where she'd fallen asleep to being brought into a medieval castle.

Damn the wench. She was supposed to be nervous and show some signs of fear and discomfort. No woman was this content with silence. Marcus grudgingly approved of her for staying strong. However, a part of him wanted to see her writhing.

Beneath me in my bed.

He jerked and glowered. Where had that thought come from? Marcus did his best to ignore the fact that his body was responding to her in ways that it shouldn't have been. *Should it?* He was extremely glad he was sitting, so she couldn't see the state he was in. *I am like a young lad faced with my first woman. She is nothing special.* Yet, still, he hungrily absorbed the vision she presented.

Trim but definitely not little; perhaps, fit would be a better word. Her hair was short and tightly curled. It looked puffy and gleamed. When he had her on his horse, he'd smelled something subtle. Fresh. Unique. The cut of her hair showed her neck, unlike women he knew who covered their hair and neck. Her height indicative of how she would fit nicely under his chin.

Eyes that were a steely gray currently were calm as they observed, straightforward, him in return. There was intelligence and suspicion lingering in their depths. Her smooth, healthy skin shone a darker tan, creating a magnificent background for her dazzling white, even teeth. Her nose was petite and slightly flat. She had full lips that just cried out to be kissed. She was, in a word, exotic. Very much so. Very alluring. Thick dark lashes framed her eyes, giving her a hooded sensual gaze without even trying. His cock pushed against his braies even more.

"What are you doing here, Katrina Lawson?" Marcus finally broke the silence, stopping the direction of his thoughts. "Where do

you come from? What is your purpose here, and how is it you travel with no escort?"

He would discover the truth. She would answer all his questions, and that would be that. In no way would he allow her to realize the effect her appearance had on his body.

She leaned back in the chair with a small shake of her head, appearing completely comfortable with her surroundings. "Look, last thing I knew I was falling asleep in the mountains by my home. I'm from Wyoming. You know, the United States. Where am I, and how did you get here? Although I'm getting a horrible feeling that I'm the one who has been misplaced." She spoke that last sentence so quietly he almost didn't hear it.

She may truly well be insane. And, perhaps, she's not as calm as she is letting on. "What means this Why-ohm-in? What are these United States? I do not understand what they are. Explain. Why were you sleeping by a stream? Have you no home?"

She lifted an eyebrow in his direction. "They are states, you know, as in the fifty states? America? Land of the free, home of the brave. That United States. That's where I'm from. I was out camping; that's why I was by the stream. Just like I said, I was doing that near my home. Let me ask you something, now. Can you tell me where I am? And, what year is it?" She worried her hands, and her lip, she rolled in her teeth.

"This is England. It is the year of our Lord eleven hundred and three."

Is he shitting me? What the fuck is going on here?

Her cool façade vanished, slipping faster than a bobsled headed down its icy course. "Eleven hundred and three? England?" Her voice rose sharply. She stood with a jerk, the heavy chair skidding away behind her. "You've got to be kidding me! I belong in the twenty-first century, not...what is this one...the...the...the twelfth one. I'm not even on the right mother fucking continent, for cryin' out loud!" She started pacing, heart pounding in time with her steps. Suddenly, she spun to face him. "This is a joke, right? Someone put you up to this?" Although, in her heart, she knew it wasn't. None of her friends would have let her send Ares off a cliff. Ares. Not to mention he knew them and wouldn't have run. Her heart cried out in pain.

Anger welled up inside her. Ares. Maybe he was hurt. "I have to go. I need to find my friend. Now!" Her voice was laced with

desperation and some fear. She didn't care. He meant so much to her. She had to find him and get home.

Twenty-first century, that phrase got Marcus' attention. That would mean she was from nine hundred years in the future. *Impossible!* He may have been an open-minded man, but this was a little too much to ask even for him to believe.

He crossed his arms and told himself to stay in the chair and not approach her. "There was someone else with you? I saw no one. Who were they? What did they look like? I can send someone to look for them."

Maybe this would be what he needed. He honestly hoped she wasn't a spy, but one never knew. She spoke nonsense—twenty-first century, indeed. Perhaps, she was just a crazy woman who claimed strange things. He wasn't sure where he sat with witchcraft.

Her expression closed down and grew defiant.

"You cannot be from the future. Are you a witch? You speak nonsense, woman. Are you a spy?"

She narrowed her gaze on him. "A spy? For who? Shit, I just told you where I was from. And, I obviously didn't know *when* I was. I don't need your help. I just need to go look for myself." She settled herself back on the chair and ran her hands over her face with a moan.

"You will stay here until I get this figured out. I will provide you with a room. It is for your own safety. And, you should be grateful it is not a cell in my dungeon. Since you are only a mere woman, you do not have understanding on how dangerous the night can be."

Flames licked at her eyes, and he almost looked down to see if he burned from the heat in her stare.

"Mere woman?" Her voice rose with indignation. "*Mere* woman? Where in the hell did you get that idea? This *must* be the blasted twelfth century because no man in their right mind would say such a thing to me."

There wasn't a single trace of fear left in her husky voice, and her hands gripped the arms of the chair so tightly he debated if it would leave an imprint on her palms.

Shocked, he growled low in anger. No one—*no one*—spoke to him in such a way. And, in addition to that error, she had the nerve to question the state of his mind. It was too much. He raised his voice in return.

“Do you dare to question my mind, wench?” His question rumbled much like a bear, gruff and low. Marcus stood, attempting to use his height to intimidate her. He placed his hands on his hips and glowered down at her with a look that would and had quelled most of the men he knew. It had no effect on this woman.

She didn’t back down. In fact, she stood, as well, and matched him glare for glare. With a slash of one hand through the air, she snapped, “I don’t give a damn who you are. Stop calling me a wench. My name, since you seem to have forgotten, is Kit.” She roared just as much as he had done, and her eyes were as hard as the stone of his castle.

“Enough,” he bellowed. “My word is law.”

The door swung open with enough force to bounce off the stone wall behind it. Roger and some other well-armed knights burst in the room weapons drawn.

Out of the corner of his eye, Marcus watched in amazement as she quickly moved to defend herself, back to the wall, the moment the door burst open, and the cries of his men reached them. The position protected her back, ensuring only a frontal attack. She held her ground and waited.

Instead of succumbing to hysterics like most females, she was prepared to put up a fight. Very admirable. He hid a grin. Foolish but admirable. She had no way to defeat trained knights. However, the look on her face said she believed she could do just that.

“Hold, men. Roger. Just a misunderstanding. I am fine. Close the door on your way out.” Marcus waved them away.

“You yelled. You never yell. Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?” Roger questioned.

“I did not yell. I *do* not yell. I...we will be fine. I can handle a simple woman,” Marcus answered, a little piqued at having his decision questioned, once again, by one of his knights in front of her.

This little woman had, in fact, gotten past his defenses and made him show emotion. Roger was right; he had yelled. That was not like him. It was truly no wonder they all had come in, swords drawn.

Marcus gathered himself and looked at Kit where she stood warily by the wall. The moment the door closed them in together, once more, he beckoned to her.

“Come, sit down. We will not be disturbed, again. We have some

things to get resolved.”

He was in control of the situation, not her. She would not make him lose his composure, again.

She glided from her position and yanked on the heavy chair, moving it with ease before she reclaimed the seat. “There’s nothing to get resolved. I want to go and find my friend; you said no. We’re at an impasse. My friend is *my* top priority. Will you let me go look for him?”

“Him?”

A sudden bolt of bitterness—unexplained and unwanted—shot through Marcus. It was a male, *a male*, for whom she was concerned. He didn’t like that, at all, nor how it made him feel. He knew he had no claim on this woman but realized that he would *like* to have a claim on her.

“If it is a man, then he should be able to take care of himself. You are not going. No more discussion on the matter. And, Katrina Lawson, you *should* be concerned for yourself and not some man.”

Who was this woman who would put the welfare of her friend, a male friend, before her own safety? What was he to her to have earned such devotion? More importantly, Marcus wondered what would it be like to have that type of devotion from her himself?

Chapter Four

*Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness*

-Lord Byron

Despair filled her. *What do I do know? How am I going to get myself out of this mess I've gotten myself into?* Forcing steel into her tone, she looked down her nose at him. "Then, we apparently have nothing else to discuss. I wish to go to this room you said I could have. I want to change."

He angled his head. "Good. You should wear something made for a woman, so while there you will properly attire yourself. No more men's clothing. Mayhap that will help your appearance." Marcus delivered the cold words in tandem with his outstretched hand for her bag.

Right, because I'm wearing the shit they did back now, like hell. Kit mutely declined his offer to hold her bag. She swung it up on her shoulder and gestured for him to lead the way, not wanting him to see the hurt his crassly thrown statement caused her. *I'm going to have to be careful with what I say; he didn't understand change when I said it earlier, not in the context I used it.* She took in his broad shoulders—the kind that would easily carry the weight of her problems, not to mention her physically—lean waist and muscular buttocks and legs as he sauntered on ahead of her.

He was built like a brick shithouse. *Hellfire and damnation. Good thing he has a beard, little protection that it offers.* She was very confused about her feelings toward him. Fear should be more prevalent in her mind than sex. Fear and *how* to get home. But, as she stared at this specimen of a man, giving him a once-over, sex was definitely taking priority. He was fine. No, he was more; he was gorgeous. This man definitely fit her idea of a perfect body. Here was a man who would do very nicely in her dreams with his sinful good looks.

Kit struggled to suppress the tremor that went through her at the thought of his big strong, callused hands running over her body. *He has a sword; he has to have callused hands.* She attempted—again—to bring her mind back to the problems at hand. The century she was in, the loss of Ares, not to mention how the hell she was going to

get home.

As if he felt her gaze on him, he squared his wide shoulders and put a bit more of arrogant swagger in his step, a swagger that seemed inherently born to every male. A swagger he owned. And did so hands-down compared to the other men she knew. Still, she shook her head. *Men are all the same, no matter the time. Crap, I need to focus.*

To keep her attention off the fine figure of a man in front of her, Kit took in her surroundings. Her gag reflex kicked in, and she scrunched her nose. The smell she equated to something similar to the stables at home when they were in dire need of cleaning. The castle was mostly stone, and the part that was wood appeared to be undergoing reconstruction. However, parts of it seemed to be coming down around her ears. The portions that were made of stone were almost swept clean, but in her opinion, the entire facility could use an immense cleansing.

He opened a door, stepped to the side, gesturing for her to enter first. She did and inhaled sharply with surprise. The chamber was opulent, and she gawked at the splendor. Not anything like she would have expected from having seen the outside of the castle or the lack of cleanliness on the inside.

The main colors in the chamber were deep blue with silver gray accents. Thick rugs covered the floor to ward off the cold from the stones. A fire in the hearth was ready to be lit. Heavily woven tapestries, intricately embroidered with beautiful scenes, covered the walls. To top it off, a massive bed took up the main portion of the room. There were gray and blue coverings on the bed, along with some furs.

Her mouth dropped open at the sight of the bed. It was huge. *Easily four people could be in there without touching.* Her gaze slanted over at the man who dominated the room with his presence, second only to the enormous bed, as she wondered what his plans were.

“Damn, that bed is huge.”

She gulped at the mentally created erotic images of the two of them in it together. Naked limbs entwined, and sweat-slick bodies.

His brow rose in response to her exclamation; however, he gave no verbal response. She confused him; she got it. It was okay, for he did the same to her. She understood he wasn't used to a woman like her, skin color notwithstanding. Her manner of dress, language. She was an enigma and had been for a lot of her life so didn't take it

personally. Plus, much more important things to focus on.

His gaze burned into her as she gingerly touched the bed. After she had made a complete perusal of the room, Kit walked right up to him and looked him in the eyes.

“This is a very nice room. Thank you.”

His shock was obvious, and he gave a low grunt. “My room is right through this door. You will become properly attired, and then, I will give you a tour of the place. Knock when you are ready. The garderobe is through that door, if you have need.” That said, he went through the adjoining door, closing it with force.

Left alone, Kit wasn’t sure what to do. They had adjoining rooms. *Why would he have me near him?* That was not necessarily a good thing. On the other hand, it could lead to some very interesting nights.

Her breathing came faster as she quickly changed into her jeans but left on her cutoff sweatshirt. She put her boots back on and slipped her boot knife on the inside of her footwear. Better to have something extra, just in case. Her clothes were loose enough that she could do capoeira, or swing up on a moving horse. She dry brushed her teeth, not wanting to use the water in the room, and made sure she was wearing deodorant. After that, she tucked her bag into a corner where she hoped no one would get to it and take it. That took her all of five minutes. Kit knocked on his door and waited for him to answer. At his responding bark, she opened the door, stepping in. His room was similar to hers, only bigger. A larger bed, its colors black and silver. The room was very dark given the hangings over the windows were drawn, so not much light got in.

“I’m ready. Let’s do this tour thing.”

Marcus paused, unsure of what to make of the woman he’d run across this morning. His whole life had turned upside down in the span of a few hours. She didn’t breakdown but she’d expressed gratitude for the room. Not what he expected, at all. Though, in the short time that he had met her, she had done nothing at all to his expectations.

She spoke strange words, wore stranger attire and wasn’t visibly scared of him. She didn’t scream like most women over the fact she was captured, and she didn’t try to get her way with feminine flirtation or tears. She didn’t even think that she was captured; she had the audacity to demand to be let out of the castle to look for

her friend, her male friend, damn it. Once in his room, he'd sat on one of his chairs, not expecting her to be ready for quite a while. He'd redressed into something a little cleaner and sat back down.

And, now, she stood in his room, appearing unconcerned by the fact his room was so dark and it was just the two of them. In fact, all she did was stare and cock an eyebrow at him.

Marcus was astonished she'd ignored his order to dress appropriately. He didn't think she had time to do much of anything and he understood why. Then, he really looked at her. His mouth grew dry, and his braises became tight. *Again.*

She wore more of the same kind of leggings, just blue, and they stuck to her a little more, outlining her nicely formed legs. Along with what was at the juncture of them. She still wore the same sleeveless jerkin that showed the whole of her arms and the firm muscles in them. No softness in her. She was a true warrior woman.

"What are you wearing?" he demanded after clearing his throat and gripping the arm of his chair.

She scowled and crossed her arms. "Clothes. I only have three sets with me. Are we going or not?"

"That is not what women wear. *When* you are properly attired, we will go." He gestured at her, upset at his visceral reaction to her.

"Excuse me, but this is what we wear where I am from, and since I don't have anything else"—she shrugged—"this is going to have to do." Her defensive stance alone brought his wandering eyes to her full breasts.

That was the problem. His and what could become everyone else's if she walked out like that. It was the way her clothes molded themselves to her body. They hid nothing. Up until now, there had been nothing provocative about them, and yet, they were extremely stimulating.

"We will have some made up for you. That will do for today, only." He nodded once, as if he had given her the momentous gift of allowing her to wear her own clothes. Marcus accepted that he wouldn't be able to function with her wearing those kinds of clothes. Against his better judgment to order a seamstress to make something for her, now, he just enjoyed the sight of her body.

Without comment, although the eyeroll spoke volumes, Kit opened his bedroom door and left. He followed immediately. While he shut his door, he gestured for her to precede him down the hall. Clarissa stood there, shooting daggers at her with her gaze. Kit

flicked her glance over Clarissa in a dismissive way, straightened her shoulders and headed off down the hall. Marcus knew this tension between them would present a problem.

Marcus noted, with a hint of smugness, the look of anger on Clarissa's face when she saw them coming out of his bedroom. He understood she was after him for his money and his title. Marcus was well aware of how much he had and what her goal was. Since she knew he needed a wife she seemed to have permanently placed herself at his holdings. He was, however, getting weary of her treatment of his servants and the villagers alike.

His gaze drifted back to the strange woman in front of him, and he wondered what her plan was. Her anxiousness to get outside, obvious. Her stride, while much shorter than his, still ate up the ground, and he found himself not having to slow himself overly much for a woman for once in his life. It had a nice feel to it. She strode like a man, but even her less than feminine walk couldn't take away the erotic sway of her hips. Nor could the fact her *derrière* enclosed in her odd garb moved with hypnotic grace. It snared his attention, and everyone else's that they passed. This woman was going to be trouble.

As they returned to the great hall by way of passing the solar, she cast a glance at him over her shoulder, raising a brow. Her question shone plainly. Where to, first?

He stalked around her, needing to see something other than her firm, not fleshy, backside encased in tight material. With a singular jerk, he pulled open the doors of the keep and headed outside. Without so much as a glance behind him, he knew how close she was. He halted at the top of the stairs, not quite sure where to take her, first.

Was she guest? Prisoner? Why am I, the lord of the keep, showing her around?

He had told Clarissa and Roger that Kit wasn't a prisoner, despite the fact he wasn't sure how he would classify her. She stepped up beside him, and he looked at her as she took in the grounds of his keep. All familiar to him and sights and sounds of everyday. Servant children ran and played with wooden swords as dogs chased them, barking with joy.

Marcus studied her expression, spying only interest, no desire to go back in. She advanced forward and trudged down the stairs where she pivoted, turned her hands up at her sides and shrugged.

She's impatient to begin.

His mouth began to curve into a smile, and he had to concentrate in order for it not to do so. He wasn't a man who smiled often.

Hard. That was the descriptor used for him. Along with a few others.

Cold.

Even fair.

But never smiling, or fun-loving.

It was an odd feeling, this one of satisfaction. Satisfaction of sharing his keep with someone who looked forward to seeing it. One who didn't view it as a chore. Or someone who strove to make him believe it wasn't with the sole purpose of impressing him. Only because they wanted to see and enjoy it. For a moment, as he observed her as she gazed about his keep, he forgot where she came from as well as the numerous reasons for her being in his presence.

Kit searched her memory for those numerous history lessons. This, right here, was something out of a book. Better, almost, for the experience. She'd always enjoyed renaissance festivals, but this took the cake, so to speak. Being how she wanted to see what things were like during medieval times. Might as well make the best of it since she wasn't going anywhere until she found Ares, anyway. Assuming she did reunite with him, there was no one hundred percent they were getting out of here and back to her time. *Big difference with faires. I knew I was heading home at the end of the day. There is no guarantee, now.*

Who knew? Maybe she could pick up a new language or hear some of hers spoken like they used to be. Never one to back down from an adventure, Kit consciously made the decision she was too intrigued to be properly scared. Once she maneuvered her way beyond the fear thing. She had a downright gorgeous man for a guide. She may be able to overhear some news about Ares. *Or more specifically where "here" was, and then, work out a way home.*

Kit peered over her shoulder at Marcus. He seemed so harsh, at least by all outward appearances. Yet, she could sense gentleness in him. It wasn't on the surface, but for some unexplained reason, she believed it wanted—no, *needed*—to be set free.

Not quite sure what he wanted with her or what her fate could be, she decided to play nice. *No reason in ending up dead or in a dungeon. I have that room; may as well keep it.* His eyes longed for

something that she couldn't quite place. His people appeared content, so he couldn't be an evil man. *Then, again, what the fuck do I know about him?* The keep was cleaner outside than in. The inside could use some elbow grease. She shuddered slightly. *Lots of elbow grease.*

As they walked, Kit ran over all she currently knew. The woman he'd called Clarissa seemed to be the lady of the castle. Or she angled to become so. *If she is the one in charge, she's very lazy and not up on the cleaning. Granted, I know it's harder to keep things cleaner, now, but...still. Okay, perhaps, it's not my place to judge.*

Marcus would give off a much gentler appearance if he would shave. *In my opinion.* His beard and moustache made him appear much more rigid and unforgiving.

Kit looked over the space before her. It was very busy. For some reason, she'd thought it wouldn't be. Soldiers practiced, and young boys tried to copy the movements with wooden swords. For a chaotic scene, it ran smoothly.

The neigh of a horse from the stables captured her complete attention. *Ares.* She recalled her saddle was still out where they'd captured her. She waited for Marcus to reach her side, unsure how to broach the subject of her saddle. She had her rifle attached to her saddle in its scabbard. Kit was wise enough to know that they did not have rifles at this time. She did not want someone else to find it and get killed.

Chapter Five

A Friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature.

-R.W. Emerson

Marcus' visitor was completely unaware of the turmoil her appearance caused everyone outside. Then again, perhaps, she knew and didn't care. Either way, she didn't respond to the leering looks. His training knights grinned as they walked by, their apparent amusement growing as his scowl deepened. He already bordered on possessive.

Before he realized it, he'd placed his hand on the small of her back. An action that seemed so right when he did it. A perfect fit. *To guide her in the right direction.* He tried to control the shiver that went through him at the simple contact with her body. She stiffened for the merest of seconds then relaxed and didn't fight or back away. She tipped her head up and met his gaze. His heart melted a bit; something about her made his go into protective mode. Damn it, he wasn't supposed to have any sort of feelings for someone he may have to have executed for being a spy. Her softer eyes changed her appearance, allowing him to see all woman and not a warrior woman. *How will she look with a big smile or in the throes of passion, in my bed?* He stifled his groan. These thoughts were getting far too frequent and out of hand.

They walked across the ground until she stopped in her tracks. Head cocked at an angle, she looked up at him. Just a direct look, no coyness or false tears.

"I need to go back to where you found me." Her husky declaration flowed gently over his senses. "I have some things left out there. Will that be possible?"

"What did you leave?" Marcus tried to sound nonchalant, unsure if his attempt at normal was his suspicion of her or the primitive reaction he had to her voice.

"My saddle. I don't want it to get ruined by rain."

"What did you have a saddle for? The only horse was that big black I did not see a woman's palfrey." Marcus refused to believe for a second that black stallion had been her mount. He was had been too wild, too untamed.

Her mouth tightened. "Like I keep saying, I was riding in the mountains at home before I showed up here. My horse may have

disappeared, but I would still like the saddle, in case I find A...my horse, again.”

“We can go. There is a palfrey you can ride.” Not confident of how well she could ride—after all, she’d lost her horse—he’d give her an older mare.

At the stable, he ordered Marauder saddled and a smaller mare. When the stableboy brought her the horse, Marcus watched her face. She roamed her gaze over the mare as if about to purchase. Yes, he was intrigued.

Then, she walked over to him. She stopped close by and gestured for him to lean down to her.

When he obliged her, she said in a low voice, keeping the words between just them. “I’m not sure that she will do. My saddle won’t fit her. Do you have a horse a little wider in girth? I don’t want to hurt this little mare.”

Stunned that she would make her objections so quietly, he was speechless, for a moment. Her only thought to be that of the horse came as another surprise. “We will bring along a sumpter, a packhorse, to carry your saddle back. If that is all, could we leave, now?”

“Thank you.” Her tone remained modulated. Kit turned away, walked over to the mare and eyed the saddle warily. The stableboy brought over the mounting block. Taking the mare’s head, he waited for her to mount. Marcus remained on the ground as she double-checked the girth and adjusted the stirrups. Finally, she mounted, without use of the block.

He was impressed by her comfort around horses. Marcus took in how she held the reins and wondered how much riding she had done. After swinging up, he nudged Marauder, and they went out through the bailey and into the village. With a tight hold on the horse he was leading, Marcus began wondering the wisdom of doing this on Marauder—he was a trained warhorse and not that docile.

After an hour in the saddle, time that passed in silence, they reached the place where he’d first located her. Marcus dismounted and tied up his two horses, keeping a distance between them. As he turned to help Kit down, she’d already landed on the ground and had tied up the mare. Currently, she was looking in the bushes. He noticed the strange wooden piece stuck up from the saddle.

Kit carried it all over to the packhorse and placed it on the

ground. She then shook out the blankets before quickly and efficiently saddling the sumpter. She moved to put the bridle on the gelding when she stopped. Her gaze halted his. He momentarily paused his examination of her saddle. "Am I riding him back or did you wish me to stay on the mare?"

Marcus, turning back to the saddle, pulled the odd wood and metal item out of the scabbard on the saddle so he didn't answer right away. She jerked it out of his hands.

"This is not for you to touch. Understand?"

He narrowed his eyes, unused to taking orders, especially from women. He hesitated, noting the underlying tone of fear in her voice. Almost as if she worried he would hurt himself. He decided to humor her, for now.

"Which horse?" she repeated, her fingers gripping the item she'd grabbed from his hands.

He focused on her unique saddle. "This is a strange saddle. Nice but strange. Looks different. You can ride the mare. I will lead this one back, again."

"Fine. I am taking this stuff to my room, though. It will *not* stay in your barn."

Her tone was confident. Enough so it struck a nerve with his pride. She hung the bridle over the saddle horn, patted the gelding and went back over to the mare.

"We will see." He put enough arrogance in his deep voice to make her understand that he was in charge. He swung up on his mount and bent down to untie the rope on the gelding.

She snorted. "Whatever." With a shake of her head, Kit grabbed the mare's mane and climbed up with ease. He couldn't pay much attention to her actions for Marauder was taking severe exception of being a lead pony. Regardless of his horse's ill temper, he recognized how she sat the mare with great expertise.

Back inside the walls, she hopped down and was by the packhorse before his stablehands were. She removed her things from the horse. She maneuvered the trappings over one shoulder with no problem, the bridle on the horn and the long stick still protruding. She held the blankets in her other hand.

Marcus watched her walk away, her legs eating up the ground, yet all he could think about was having them wrapped around his waist or head.

He was almost in shock by her apathy of the situation. Did

nothing throw this woman? He dismounted and went after her. At the door, he opened it for her and watched her head up the stairs and vanish from view. He also noticed the glare that Clarissa gave her as she passed.

Marcus pondered over the woman named Kit Lawson. She was unlike any woman he had met before. Her directness and refusal to accept what was happening stunned him every time he thought about it.

Everyone had been on edge since the wars started. Not sure what her ultimate plan was, he needed to keep an eye on her. He did have his duty to his liege lord, the king.

He crossed his arms. Roger disapproved of her. For one thing, her skin was the wrong color. She was darker than the gypsies they occasionally saw around here, and those people were too dark by Roger's standards. He'd called Katrina a Moor. Marcus admitted she did appear similar to some of those they fought against in the First Crusade. Perhaps, Roger had a different reason for not trusting her that he hadn't informed Marcus of thus far. However, it was just as possible Roger's distrust was because of his fondness for Clarissa.

Marcus also understood Clarissa had incredible jealousy toward the newcomer. Clarissa had always been a woman who craved attention, and he just didn't have the time or the energy to spend dealing with her whiny whims. She was used to the riches of the court. He was a warrior. Wooing a woman wasn't his style.

Kit, however, intrigued him like no woman ever had. And, he longed for more time to explore his reaction to her.

Physically, he reacted to her in a way he didn't for Clarissa. Not even their first time together. There was just something in regards to Kit that made him want to get beneath that calm, composed exterior and release the explosive heat he knew simmered underneath. No one was that poised with what she had been through.

Her gaze overflowed with intelligence and a sensual fire that burned there when she scrutinized him. Usually when she believed he couldn't see her looking at him. Her skin was clear and smooth. Lashes that framed those intense gray orbs were long, thick and sooty. Her full lips held a natural rouge that made them more prominent and luscious in appearance. She had no reason to use the paint some of the woman of the court did. Hers was a natural beauty.

She had a nice waist and legs that fit in those leggings in a way that didn't leave much to the imagination. Her breasts were high and full. He had never seen anyone like her before. Her waist was not like Clarissa's, where he could span it with his hands, but it was still small. She was not skin and bones but had nice, extremely nice, curves in definitely the right places.

Once again, he realized where his thoughts were going and forced them to a halt. He had enough trouble around here without getting involved with someone else. Yes, he needed to find a wife, but there was just something about Kit. It was an attraction he just couldn't explain. Frustrated with his feelings, he headed out to the training area, to take on some of his men and get a good workout. Maybe, then, she would leave his thoughts.

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Once in the privacy of her room Kit checked around, making sure nothing had been harmed, after which she made sure to secure her rifle.

The rifle was a gift from her father. A Winchester Model 94 Trails End, fashioned to look like the rifles did in the old days. Old days for her, not where she was now in the 1100s. *What do I consider where I am now? Beyond ancient?* The rifle had a full eleven round magazine capacity, and hers was done with .357 cartridges.

She made sure that it was locked down and then stored it by her bag. She did not want someone to mistakenly get hurt. *It would be just my luck to do something to change history and get stuck by in this time.*

A shudder ran through her body with the thought of where she was. She just shook her head; her time of thinking that, perhaps, it was nothing more than a dream had swiftly run its course, and she couldn't hold onto that fantasy, any longer. She sat on the bed and took several deep breaths. Paused for a few then did it, again. Desperate to blow off some tension, she wondered whether to run or work out. Perhaps work in the stables. Hell, even the kitchen, just do anything to take her mind off what she was experiencing.

Kit sat in her room, thoughts jumbled and racing. Marcus was creating emotions she'd thought only existed in those sappy romance novels, ones she liked to read on occasion. Nothing in those was real, but here, she *was* feeling the "jolt of electricity" at a single touch. Who knew? Romance was for real. Not sure what she was supposed to do, now, she checked around her room a bit more.

Not that it took her long for, despite the size of the chamber, it was sparse.

After the room was explored, she decided to no longer ignore her rumbling belly. Kit reached into her pack and grabbed some jerky. Eating it, she headed downstairs to check out a little more of the castle. Most of the servants got out of her way and avoided her gaze. She didn't blame them, but at the same time, she was wishing for a bit of conversation.

By smell, she located the kitchen. Kit tried, barely succeeding, to conceal her horror at the mess. *Oh, sweet hell, they actually cook food in a place like this. No wonder people didn't live long.* She gazed about for the person in charge. The kitchen area was atrocious. Dirty pots and pans everywhere, and grease and other filth just lying around. Her stomach heaved and churned at the sight. She was no longer hungry. *In fact, I think I could do with never eating, again.* The jerky she'd had did not want to stay down.

Kit saw an older woman others looked to, went up to her and waited to be noticed. *Jesus, even her hands are disgusting. Do they even wash them here? Oh, sick. I can't even begin to contemplate what's beneath her nails.*

The woman looked at her and snapped, "What? What do you want?" At least, the woman spoke English.

"I was wondering if there was a glass I could use to get a drink?" *Glass, maybe that's not the right word. Mug. Cripes, all this nastiness is throwing off my game.*

"A glass?" Quickly combing her memory for another word, Kit amended her statement. "Something to drink out of. A tankard, mug."

The woman picked up one that was on the side of a table and handed it to her. As she took it, Kit noticed it hadn't been spared the mess surrounding the rest of this place—it was hideous. *Oh, gross.* Her stomach churned once more at the sight of all the bugs and other things floating in it. *No fucking way I drink out of this.*

"Water is over there." The dirty hands pointed toward a bucket.

Not sure how to approach this subject, Kit asked, "Where do I wash the cup afterward, and where should I go to fill up the water that I took?" *Maybe it would soften the woman a little if she knows I'm willing to clean and replace what I took.*

The woman's eyes widened in surprise, and Kit recognized the hint of slight acceptance. *I've gotten to her.*

“Water is out there in the well. Washing water is over here. Mead is there.”

With a forced smile, Kit walked over to the washing water, finding it was lukewarm and not all that clean. She went to the bucket for drinking, she noticed that it had been sitting there for a while and things floated in it. *This is the reason people back now don't drink much water, and I don't blame them, but I can't drink mead or whatever the heck it is.* Kit barely repressed a shudder as she wondered what to do. She knew she had a cup in her bag, but that would not be polite. *Then again, in this situation, who gives a fuck about being polite? This shit is nasty. This is about me not getting dysentery or whatever they died of back here.*

A loud crash snapped her out of her thoughts. The old woman had dropped a pot of vegetables on the floor. She attempted to pick them up, while the rest of the kitchen staff just stood by and watched as she struggled to get down on the floor. *Not sure if they're scared to help or just asses, but that's wrong.*

With a reprimanding glare for the others, Kit trotted over to her and stayed the woman with a hand. “Here, let me get that for you.” The woman looked up, surprise in her eyes. Kit swiftly gathered the spilled vegetables and placed them in the pot. “Would you like me to wash them off since they fell?” She waved a hand. “Never mind. I'll go get some water from the well.” Kit swiped an empty pail, she looked at her asking, “Will this one be all right to get water?” Once she received a nod, Kit headed in the direction of the well.

Returning with the water, she discovered they were speaking French. Not letting on that she understood them, over all, she went about her task of washing the vegetables. An act she made sure to do very well.

Quickly finishing with that task, she asked, “Where do you dump dirty water?”

Another servant helped her with this question, and Kit got rid of it. *At least, there are some forms of vegetables during now.* Kit ignored the shocked gasps and murmurs in French as she saw to the task of refilling it with water from the well. *They can say whatever they want, but if I'm here, I'll be damned if I eat food from a place like that.*

When the pot was full with *clean* water and heating on the fire, Kit looked to the woman who currently dealt with the now clean veggies. “Is there something else I can do to help? Washing maybe?” *Scrubbing? Mopping? Getting you to wash your hands?*

They spoke in stilted English, but for the most part, they made their point clear. She was welcome there; granted, they were a bit leery. *I thought there was a hierarchy in the kitchens which created issues. Maybe they're just all shocked by me.*

After Kit got all of them to wash their hands, one woman brought her some freshly made bread and some cheese to eat. There didn't appear to be anything wrong with it, so she took an exploratory bite. The food tasted good to her empty stomach. After they cleaned the platter, they got back to the work of preparing the dinner. Dinner production for the knights was busy and hard work. Kit stayed there the whole time, making herself useful. If the time ever came, she could use some allies in her corner.

During the entire preparation, Kit cleaned like she never had before. The mess was just too much, and there wasn't any way she would be able to force food fixed in such a situation past her lips. *Shameful how it is, the bread wasn't bad, but damn, I'm worried about what it may do to me, and I don't have enough jerky to last me more than two days.*

A few servants started to assist when they realized what she was doing. With about half of them scouring, the place grew clean pretty fast. The other half continued on with getting ready for the evening meal.

The mess had Kit working like a woman possessed; she took it section by section. Her mom would have a fit over the filthy conditions the kitchens were she there. And, since her mom had passed that on to Kit, she had to do something about it.

Chapter Six

Odi et amo

I hate and love

-Gaius Valerius Catullus

Marcus went into Kit's room through the adjoining door. There was no sign of her. The wench was gone. He scarcely contained his roar of fury as he stormed down the stairs, bellowing her name. Upon his entrance to the great hall, he spied the servants getting ready for the night meal. Roger was seated in a chair by the hearth.

Roger looked up when Marcus burst into the room. The amused glance on his face gave away his thoughts. "I haven't seen her come through here." Roger offered the information without being asked.

Marcus bit back another yell. "All of her stuff is gone. Would she be crazy enough to take one of my mounts?" Not even waiting for an answer, Marcus headed out the door toward the stables at a run. Roger bounded after him.

Marcus burst into the stables, causing startled stableboys to gape at him before they swiftly altered their gazes. "Where is she? Which horse did she take?" Their expressions did nothing to calm him down.

One of the braver boys asked him in a timid voice, "Where is who, milord?"

"The wen...woman that I was riding with earlier."

He gulped, fear obvious. "She hasn't been here, milord. The last time we saw her, she was with you."

Upset by that news, he turned and left the stables. Roger fell into step with him, keeping his peace. *If she had not left by horse, then she must be on foot. Since she would have to carry all of her things, she would not get very far. I can easily overtake her on horseback. But, which way did she head?*

His heavy steps stomped along the stone floor. None of the servants claimed to have seen her leaving in any direction. Not sure action to take, half tempted to leave her out there so she could face the dangers by herself, he went to grab some food, just in case she'd gotten farther than he figured she could have.

As Marcus strode to the kitchens, he slowed when he heard laughter coming from the servants. That, in itself, was uncommon and strange. His staff had been subdued since Clarissa had moved

herself in. She treated them with both disdain and rudeness.

The place was dirty. The food wasn't impressive, partially warm and only mildly tasty. But, to hear the servants laughing... That amazed him. It also offered him a momentary distraction from his current quest.

He paused in the doorway of the kitchen, taking in the scene. His misplaced woman was in the middle of the kitchen, helping to prepare food. She told jokes and stories of how things were in her home. After the realization hit him that she was fine, he contented himself by watching. Finally, he recognized what it was about this that was odd—she spoke to them in French.

She spoke French. It wasn't exactly the same as the way he spoke it, but she could be understood. The same language in which Clarissa called her a slave. Kit had given no notice of that when he and Clarissa argued about her. Despite their behavior on it, this woman hadn't given any sign, at all. She'd acted as if she didn't understand a thing. *The wench is cleverer than I realized.*

She'd made herself right at home in his kitchen with his servants. Marcus looked around again, taking in the differences. The room was spotless. The food smelled delicious, for once, no stench of old rotten food lingered, and his stomach rumbled loudly. A few servants looked up, saw him, and the atmosphere changed. Once again, they were serious as the laughter disappeared immediately.

Kit peered up at the quiet that descended over the kitchen. Her gaze found him as he leaned against the frame, watching her. She smiled at him while continuing to chop vegetables. Marcus didn't want to address how her smile made his gut flip. He crossed his arms and remained silent.

The servants, after a while, picked up the conversation, again. He supposed it was because he didn't seem angry or upset with them. It wasn't as carefree as before, but they tried, and for that reason, he kept his expression blank.

He couldn't begin to explain how relieved he was by the fact Kit was still there and hadn't run off. Now, he wanted her to come to him.

She would come to him.

She would look at him, again, then walk over to apologize and explain what she was doing.

He was wrong, for she did no such thing. Kit glanced over at him, and he beckoned with a jerk of his head. She dismissed him

and proceeded to have a conversation with the old woman, Edith.

Stunned by her arrogance, Marcus wanted to roar at her. He took a deep breath and said, "Katrina." When she looked at him, he crooked his finger at her.

One eyebrow rose, and he swore amusement filled her eyes. "What do you want? I'm busy helping with dinner." She focused back on her conversation with Edith and the food she chopped.

Her audacity shocked him. Marcus stood up straighter and commanded, "Katrina, come hither. Come to me. Now." She lifted her head and narrowed her gaze. At the sight of her eyes getting full of rebellion, he declared to her in a loud voice. "You will come to me. Now."

She scrutinized him then shook her head. "If you want me to come over to you, you may ask nicely, Marcus. Or you can come to me if you wish to speak to me. Quit yelling. God, man, you are scaring your help." She said her piece quickly.

His mouth nearly dropped open in shock. The nerve of her. Marcus strode over to her with a fierce glower on his face. Servants scrambled out of the way. Unfortunately, he knocked over a little girl who stood by the corner of a table. She glanced at him, her face scrunched up, and she started to cry. Not a quiet one but a loud, lusty wail.

At the first cry, Kit glanced between him and the child as if she expected him to help the child up. When he just stood there, scowling down on the child, she huffed. Kit ran over to the girl, picked her up, and turned her head away from Marcus. Kit frowned at him herself, matching him glower for glower. She handed the child over to her mother, who tried unsuccessfully to calm and quiet her before Kit faced Marcus, once more.

"Why are you so insistent on making everyone scared of you?" Her eyes flashed like a sword as the sun glinted off it.

"You would dare challenge me? When I tell you to come to me, you will obey. Do we understand each other?"

She propped her hands on her hips with a snort. "You're damn right I'd challenge you. When you scare a little girl just because I didn't jump to your beck and call, I'll do more than just challenge you. I'll resist even more. I'm no dog, *Marcus*. You would do well to remember that."

He noticed a drawn out quality to her voice. She was furious with him. Not because he had yelled at *her* but because he didn't

show enough concern for the little girl.

Katrina was a defender of those less fortunate. Grudgingly, he saw her point but wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of admitting that. He was lord of this castle, and the sooner she learned that, along with her place, the sooner things could go back to normal. Marcus met her flashing eyes, and he grabbed for her arm.

Nothing but air. She had a habit of moving very quickly, and he didn't like it.

He reached for her arm, again. Despite catching her, he noticed the look in her eyes. It was almost a warning. Something like, *If I didn't want you to touch me, you wouldn't.* He steered her out of the room. She had the mettle to look over her shoulder and say goodbye to the kitchen staff.

Marcus dragged her into the hall and pushed her up against the wall. He took several deep breaths as he struggled to hold onto his fraying temper. "What were you doing in there? Why didn't you tell me where you were going? Why didn't you tell me you spoke French?"

Kit straightened, smacked his hand from her arm, and glared right back at him. She snapped back, "I didn't think I had to tell you anything. You said I was a guest. Has that changed, now? Am I a prisoner, slave, or something worse?"

He didn't speak, and she continued, "For your information, I was hungry, and since no one told me where you were, I went to find something to eat. I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't run away. Look, I give you my word that, until I find my friend, I will not willingly leave. Am I to be kept under lock and key? I can work. I don't mind helping out, here and there." She huffed. "Well, what is it to be?"

He mulled over what she'd said and didn't like how her words made him uncertain. So, being Marcus, he reacted how he always did, without thinking. "What good is your word? You are a *woman*, even if you don't dress like one." There was no way she could possibly mistake his meaning.

A woman's word was no good.

Kit swallowed her rage. She tried hard to keep all anger out of her voice. "I'm sorry that you don't trust women. I don't trust men. Either way, I have given my word, and since I have done such, I won't break it. Believe it, don't believe it, I don't really care."

His expression informed her he wasn't used to such frankness in a woman. *Get used to it, bub. I'm not your typical quiet woman. I didn't grow up in this time where women were quelled. You yell, I'll yell, and I'll be damned if I back down just because you tower over me and have a dick.*

"I do not trust you. You can walk around but do not start trouble or you will answer to me. You will have a guard, at all times, outside of these walls." He abruptly turned and stalked off as if he couldn't stand being close to her for a moment longer.

Well, that went well. Good Lord, he's complex. And, the bigger issue is why I wanted to touch him. Chest. Arms. Everything.

Since she had gained permission to go around, she decided not to wait any longer. Kit proceeded outside, where she found herself face to face with a young man. He looked to be about sixteen or so. He was taller than her by about two inches and had piercing blue eyes. He looked down his nose at her, his expression informing her he believed himself to be above watching her.

"I take it you are to be my guard?" Not really waiting for a response, she decided to try and break the ice. "I'll try to make this as painless as possible for you. I'm not very picky. I just want to be outside. If there is something that I'm not supposed to do, just let me know. What's your name?"

"My name is Gavin. I am a squire and have no time to trail a wench. I am here because my lord orders it." The snide tone of his voice prompted her response.

"Watch your tone, boy. My name is Kit. Do not, I repeat, do *not* call me wench. I may be a woman, but this *woman* will kick your ass. Understand?" Steel laced her words as she crowded him back up the steps.

With a slash of her hand, she increased her scowl. "I'm going to go back to the kitchen and help them. You need to work on your manners and cease the spoiled little brat act. Get it through your head; I don't want you to be here any more than you do. Grow up. Get away from me." Her reprimand done, she strode back in the doors. She brushed by Marcus who, from his expression, had expected her to come back in. *I wonder if I can get away with punching him in the face.*

Instead of retreating up the stairs in a snit, Kit headed for the kitchens. *Not about to give him the satisfaction to know he ruined my time.*

Supper was served hot and fresh. All the knights dug into the food with relish. Clarissa sat on Marcus' right and shared from his platter, course after course, giving a good appearance of a couple. Kit noticed that the few times she entered the hall.

After the meal, the woman snapped at the servants and attempted to do the same to Kit, who just held her gaze and lifted an eyebrow in challenge. When Clarissa finally left, Kit noticed the look she extended to Marcus. Blatant invitation.

Why that's bothering me? I don't know, but I have to get over it. I don't need to be involved with this man or make it look as if I want to be, which may bring his woman after me. She already doesn't like me. And, it's not like I blame her for extending an invitation to him. I would.

Kit worked side by side with the servants. They remained until even the stone floor gleamed. Then, and only then, did she leave after bidding the servants goodnight.

Kit was exhausted. She'd known that Marcus had popped his head in and watched them, but she never let on she had been aware. Sadness overtook her as she thought of Ares as she climbed the stairs. *Be safe, Ares.*

As she approached her room, she saw Clarissa by her door. Kit groaned quietly at the sight. *You're between me and the bed, bitch, be careful. I'm tired and ornery.* Kit watched cautiously as the woman glared at her, trying hard not to get defensive. Kit just waited for her to make the first move.

Clarissa gave a haughty sniff. "I am not sure what you are planning. This should be my room since I am going to join with Marcus. Stay away from him and out of his bed. You are nothing to him. He will marry me. You would be wise to listen to me."

Kit didn't speak, just allowed the woman her tirade. She didn't want a confrontation and hoped, once she got it off her chest, Clarissa would leave. *I don't know why he put me here.*

Unfortunately, the more Clarissa spoke, the madder she got. With a snarl at her, Clarissa swung her hand toward Kit's face.

She reacted, capturing the thin wrist in an ironclad grasp.

Kit stepped closer. "This is your one warning. Don't ever attempt to strike me, again." Kit tightened her grip before releasing her and moving by her into the room. She closed the door silently behind her and leaned against it with a heavy sigh.

Bitch is lucky I don't want anything more than to crawl into bed and sleep. I'm really going to have to watch her.

Kit wished with all her being that she would be sent back home. That, when she woke, she would be in her own bed. The reality of her situation had begun to sink in. For some reason, she was here and what she wanted was to be home in her bed at *her* house. She changed into her sweats and did a little workout, but the day's events had taken their toll on her. Kit lit the fire in the hearth, dry brushed her teeth and got ready for bed. When the room had lost its chill, she climbed into the massive bed and curled up under the coverlets and furs where sleep claimed her moments later.

Kit woke before the sun, as was her wont. She took a little time lying in bed, going over where she was. Despite the chill in the air, she climbed from the huge bed and swiftly took care of her needs, glad it was dark and she didn't have to look at the fact she was pissing in a pot. The castle was quiet. Wearing a different set of clothes, she cracked her door. There was no one in sight. She crept past Marcus' door, headed down the stairs, and out into the morning. During all of it, she never saw another person.

Once outside the castle, she stretched and got ready for her run. She walked to the gate and waited for the guard to notice her. After a bit of coercion on her part, he agreed to let her out, for a while, after she promised to come back soon. His reluctance was obvious, but he opened the gate once she reminded him she was a guest, not a prisoner. She counted herself lucky he'd not heard about the requirement for her to be escorted by a guard outside of the castle walls. He let her out the postern.

Past the castle walls, she made her way to the village, which was slowly starting to wake, then started to run. She ran until her body reminded her that it had reached its limit. She wiped the tears which had fallen as her situation hit her, yet again. As she turned back toward the castle, she picked out a large grassy meadow that would be great for her capoeira workouts. She worked out then walked to a nearby quiet lake on the meadow's edge, where she took a swift dip in the cold water after making sure that there was no one around.

Having seen no sign of Ares, she returned back, where she waited for the guard to let her back in. For a moment, she wondered if he would just leave her out there, but then, he swung open the small door.

Kit, shivering lightly from the water combined with the chill in the air, headed for the kitchen. This room was warm and smelled

wonderful with fresh baked bread. Edith smiled at her as she entered. *Good, at least it's still clean from yesterday.*

"What are you doing up this early?" the woman asked.

Kit smiled in return. "This is the time I get up at home. May I have some of that bread? It smells wonderful."

"Help yourself. Why are you wet? What happened?" Concern leached into her expression.

"I took a bath. Is there anything I can do to help you out here?"

"No, we are fine. Things will not start getting busy for about another hour or two. A bath? Those will kill you. One should not expose themselves to water like that, especially not now with the winter coming on." Edith ambled around the kitchen with a slow pace, as if she was in pain.

That explains why this place looked like shit when I arrived.

Cleaning isn't important. "I am used to taking a bath daily. I promise that it won't kill me. Are you all right? You look like you are in pain. Can I get someone for you?" Concern filled her.

"No. I will be fine. Just getting old. These cold mornings make me a little stiff, that is all. Nothing to worry about."

"I'm going to change but will be right back down to give you a hand." Kit hurried up the stairs, paying no attention to the noise she made. After she quickly shoved into her last clean shirt and jeans, she put her hiking boots on, again. She again dry brushed her teeth and double-checked her appearance before making her way back to the kitchen. Her silver ring was gone, and she swore. *All good, I can handle that if it's the only thing I lose while I'm stuck here. I can always replace it when I make it back home. And, yes, here, I am being positive.* That was something that could be replaced if and when she made it home.

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After going for a night swim to curb his yearning for the stranger at his castle, Marcus'd found himself quietly opening the door between the two rooms. She'd lain under the covers sound asleep, the dying fire casting a golden glow over her face. Katrina had looked exhausted and sad, at the same time. Remnants of tearstains lingered upon her cheeks. He'd stood there, watching over her for a while, but when she'd moaned in her sleep, he'd gotten up, thinking he should leave.

Loath to leave her, he'd instead stayed, building up her fire. He'd taken another fur from his room and laid it over her. Marcus'd

looked over her pile of things. He'd picked up the silver band on top and held it in his hand. He'd enjoyed the feel of the ring in his hand, acknowledging it gave him a sense of peace. One of contentment that had been missing from his life up until that very moment. He had been consumed with an urge to crawl into bed beside her and hold her to him. Reluctantly, he'd returned to his room and gotten into his bed after he'd placed the ring in the bottom of the chest then fell to sleep himself.

Now, Marcus came awake to the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs. He tensed, wondering what the trouble was. No knock came on his door, but he could make out sounds of Kit hurrying around in her room. He relaxed somewhat. It was earlier than normal for him to rise, and he wondered what his "guest" was doing up. Clarissa never got up early if she could help it. For a woman who, by all appearances, wanted the title of Lady Quinn, she really didn't take part in the running of the castle. However, she enjoyed the fine silks he offered her along with the money and position, but the actual day-to-day task of maintaining the place did not seem to interest her.

When the sounds faded from next door, Marcus rose and dressed. He made his way down to the first floor. He saw none but a servant lighting a fire in the great hall, so he strode for the kitchen. He knew Kit was there before he saw her there. She wore more clothes like the ones from yesterday, blue trousers that cupped her tightly in some places and a gray tunic of some kind. Her half-bared arms were elbow deep in dough. As she kneaded, she chastised the old woman for working too hard. It was obvious whose work Kit was doing. Edith didn't look like she felt good, so he didn't interfere. He just stood there and listened to their conversation.

Kit was telling Edith about her parents, and there existed a tremendous amount of love and pride in her voice as she spoke of them. She talked of her life there and what she did. Hearing that she could read and write made him stand up and take notice. She intrigued him. Immensely. He waited, mesmerized and listening to her light drawn-out enunciation on her words.

Without taking her eyes off of her job in front of her, Kit included him in the conversation. "Good morning, Marcus. Did you sleep well?"

Shocked because he didn't think that she had noticed him, he

cleared his throat and came farther into the kitchen. At his presence, Edith stood hastily, fear in her expression, and tried to take over her work, again. Marcus waved her back to her seat and took one opposite her. She looked at him curiously. He understood why, for he rarely came into the kitchens and *never* sat with the servants.

Kit swallowed and struggled to regain the calm she'd had about her right up until the lord of the castle entered the area. She wasn't sure what to do. *I know what I'd like to do, but running over to him probably isn't the smartest idea I've ever had in my life. I'll stay right here, thank you very much.*

The rest of the servants weren't sure how to react either as they began to arrive. When he basically ignored them, they just went about their work. Kit formed loaves out of the kneaded dough then another servant took and placed them in the fire to bake. After it was taken away, Kit pinned her gaze on him.

"What brings you here this early in the morning? From the looks of the servants here, you don't do this often."

"Good morning, Katrina. I was looking for you. Most ladies don't get up before dawn."

The way he said her name made heat pool in her stomach. Surely, no one had made her name sound so sensual before. His voice was deep and mesmerizing. *Shameful how fucking good he looks this early in the morning. No wonder Clarissa doesn't get up early. I wouldn't let him out of my bed, either.*

She cleared her throat. "Sorry about the noise. I didn't know you could hear me." She dove into forming more loaves and tried to forget his presence. Finally, he left, going off somewhere, making her breathe all the more easily. Even so, she couldn't ignore the sexy grin that flashed slightly on his face before he left, as if he was well aware of his effect on her.

Edith looked at her with a knowing gaze after Marcus left. Not daring to say anything to the woman who was entirely too shrewd for her own good, Kit remained silent. She stayed in the kitchen while they served breakfast to the castle. After helping them clean up, she went in search of her own personal guard to go for a horseback ride.

During her ride with Gavin, she stayed quiet, just enjoying the feel of a horse beneath her. They headed toward where Ares disappeared. As they arrived at the cliff, she halted. "Is there a way

to get to the bottom of this?" *It looks steep but not impossible. Ares could have made it.*

"Why would you want to go down there? It is too dangerous for a woman. There is a way down there, but it does not lead to much."

She bit back her instinctive response about what a woman could or couldn't do. "What's down there? Are there fields or is it rock type stuff? Could a horse survive down there?"

"I suppose. There may not be lots of food, but one could survive for a while, I suppose. Why?"

"No reason. Just curious." She dismounted, walked over to the edge of the cliff, and let out a piercing whistle. Kit strained her ears for any response. Tense moments passed, and she let another whistle go.

Nothing.

"Are you thinking your horse is down there? No lady's horse could survive down there. It would have to be a horse that could defend himself. There are wolves and things down there."

Again nothing to her whistle. *Wolves? Be safe, my boy. Please be safe. And, a mare is just as capable of defending herself, you ass.*

Kit, swamped with sorrow, mounted her horse in defeat and headed back. When they reached the courtyard, she dismounted and quietly made her way to the door, Gavin following.

As they approached the stairs, he asked in a snide tone, "Is that all for today? Am I done watching you, now?"

Heart heavy, Kit didn't even respond to the sarcasm in his voice, just pushed inside. She ignored the hall, filled with more knights and Clarissa. All she did was walk through. She also didn't pay much attention how Marcus watched her leave out of the corner of his eye and grew angry over Gavin's treatment. Nor did she slow when he pulled Gavin aside and reprimanded him. Clarissa noticed.

As the weeks went by, Kit's routine was pretty much the same. She woke early, went for her run, and got in a workout. After which, she would bathe then go help in the kitchens. She took daily rides with Gavin to the cliff.

She continued to wear her pants but stayed out of the way of most of the knights. She avoided Marcus and rarely saw him. She never took dinner with him and his men but rather ate with the servants. The time was taking its toll on her, as her clothes became looser on her as her weight dropped.

Chapter Seven

*See! how she leans her cheek upon her
hand:*

*O! that I were a glove upon that hand,
that I might touch that cheek.*

-Shakespeare

Marcus would have to be blind not to have noticed the changes that had fallen over his castle as the weeks passed. The floors always strewn with fresh, sweet smelling rushes. Even the servants were happier, not to mention everything ran smoother. Winter may have been approaching, but it didn't matter; the place remained clean. Tapestries had been cleaned and hung, again, along with newly made banners that bore his crest.

His castle had been scrubbed from top to bottom. It had begun to feel like it was a home. The food was good and the mood happy. Marcus did not speak to his guest much. He watched her from afar, noting how she still refused to wear a dress, despite having the clothing made for her. She spent most of her time in the kitchens or outside with the children.

Marcus was having dreams of burying himself deep inside her warm wetness. Her legs would be wrapped around his waist as he plunged within her. One such morning, when he awoke after the vivid dream, he was covered in sweat and had reached sexual release. The proof was the wet spot in his bed. It was something that had not happened to him in many years. He also noticed that Kit seemed to be avoiding him, which bothered him more than he cared to admit. That, in itself, made Clarissa happy, however.

One morning, Marcus decided Kit had avoided him long enough and sought her out. He found her seated by the well, surrounded by children. She wove a story, apparently a very good one since no one even looked up as he approached. Some of the adults were even caught in her web of the tale. Jealously flared to life inside him. She kept herself from him, taunting him from a distance and, yet, willingly gave herself to everyone else. It was too much.

"Katrina. Might I have a word with you?" He deliberately kept his voice calm.

She flashed a grin at the gathered group. "I'll finish this later, I promise." She rose gracefully from her seated position and walked

over to him, where she tilted her head up at him. "What can I do for you?"

"A moment of your time, if you please." His words were laced with sarcasm, and he ignored it. Wanting her attention on him, not others.

One eyebrow quirked briefly. "What? You have my attention; what do you want?"

"Why are still wearing men's clothing? You are to wear clothes benefiting your station here." He had meant just to spend some time with her, but the words flowing from his mouth were harsh. In that second, Marcus realized that his jealousy had gotten out of control. "Go up and change into something more appropriate." Jealous of the fact that there were others that looked upon what he had deemed his own.

Her expression remained unreadable. "*These* are the only clothes that I *have*. They serve their purpose just fine. Since I don't know what my station is here, I'll just keep on wearing them." She turned away from him and walked back to the group.

His fury erupted. He swore to himself as he stalked after her. Before she could turn back toward him, Marcus snagged her around the waist, lifted her up and dropped her over his shoulder.

Marcus whistled for his horse, which was ready since his original intention was to take her on a ride. When Marauder came up to them, Marcus tossed her stiff body unceremoniously over the front of the horse and swung up behind her. He touched his heels to his horse, and they headed out of the bailey. He was heedless of every eye on them as he left.

Marcus struggled to control his wayward emotions churning within him. How had this little woman broken through his defenses like this? No female had ever made him lose control before, hadn't ever undeniably dominated his thoughts before. Yet, this one was always present in his mind. She ruled his thoughts and his dreams. It was unacceptable.

He'd come to the decision in the bailey, when she'd walked away from him, that if he just took her, then she would be no longer be a desire for him, and things would get back to normal. He was the lord here; he could take whomever he wished. Even then, and still, he recognized it wouldn't work. He'd never forced himself on a woman and had no intention of beginning to do so, now. Women were weaker and deserved to be protected and have male

guidance.

Kit seemed independent and headstrong with no desire to have any guidance from men. He sighed and looked at the woman laying over the front of his horse. She radiated rage, and he knew, while he had wanted to get closer to her, this had succeeded in pushing her further away.

He brought Marauder to a stop near the lake. Marcus dismounted then lifted her off and set her on her feet. He expected to see her in tears when he looked down at her, only to be met by silver eyes that were as hard and unyielding as the blade of his sword.

Unconsciously taking a step back from the fury in her eyes, he realized that she was not going to beg for quarter. As he waited for her to speak, he took a step closer to her. She did nothing but raise her chin in defiance and challenge.

Frustrated, Marcus raked his hand through his dark hair. He had not wanted it like this; women had always flocked to him. From the scullery maids up to women in Clarissa's station. The fact that this one who haunted his dreams, his every thought, didn't want him had made him lose control.

As he watched her walk toward the water, Marcus wasn't sure if he should go after her. He realized that he'd embarrassed her in front of everyone today, but he'd been so angry.

Angry that she would prefer the company of servants and children to him. Angry that she wasn't scared of him like everyone else was. Angry that he couldn't make her want him. Angry that she didn't seem to be affected by his presence the way he was by hers.

With a pat to Marauder's neck, he secured him and followed her. She washed the dirt from her neck and face that lingered from her "ride" here. Still, she didn't speak. It was disturbing, really.

Marcus splashed water on himself also while he struggled to find the words to say to her. He faced her and saw her staring longingly off into the distance. "I hope the ride here didn't cause you any discomfort."

What a stupid thing to say. Of course it had; he had thrown her over his horse like a sack of grain.

"I'm fine. I do prefer to ride upright, however."

There was no rancor in her voice, just sad resignation of her fate. Whatever that might be. He knew, in that moment, she was willing to accept whatever punishment the lord of the castle would

bestow upon her. With grace, she settled down upon the ground.

He did not like that sound of such defeat coming from her. She was defiant. She loved a challenge, loved to challenge him.

"I will see to it that you do so on the way back." He wanted to keep her talking. He wanted for her to understand how he felt. Marcus wished that her voice wouldn't sound so hopeless, so he tried to keep his tone light.

He liked hearing all the energy she portrayed through her voice, not this emptiness he heard, now. She was refreshing. She was real. No simpers, no holding grudges, no screams. He *liked* her. While he hadn't had too many interactions with her, he couldn't help the admiration which had grown for her during her time here.

He didn't believe he'd ever liked a woman before. He realized that he did not want her to change. He wanted her to like him, as well. Marcus wanted to be one she would talk to easily and make smile and laugh like she had with the rest of his people.

"Thank you." She turned her gaze to his and offered a small smile. Kit stood abruptly and started pacing. "I assume that you brought me here for a reason. What is it? I'm sorry if I did something wrong back there, but the children were in the middle of a story and I wished to finish it."

It was an olive branch, and he had to take it or they were going to be back as adversaries. "I was angry; I know you have been avoiding me. Why?" He insisted on eye contact while waiting for her response.

She chewed on her lower lip and shrugged. "I think that it's in the best interests of all concerned. Besides, your mistress doesn't want me close to you. It is not that hard to stay out of your way. Safer all the way around."

He smiled at her words and the delivering voice. They were throatier than usual. But, all in all, it suited her. "I demand—" Her eyebrow shot up and he amended, "I wish, for you to eat with me...us. Instead of with the servants. I want to learn more of this place you say you come from. I find it intriguing what you claim."

He moved closer to her. "You say that you read and write. You speak French, some of the words are different as with your English, but you seem to be well versed in the language. Do you know any others? I wish to learn about you. I want your secrets to be revealed to me. Most of all, I want you in my bed." He made sure to hold her gaze when he imparted that bit of information to her. Her nostrils

flared slightly, but she didn't back down or look away.

"Does that shock you? It should, you know. I have never had to pursue a woman before. It should be interesting. You will tell me everything there is to know about you."

She did that thing with her eyebrow, once more. "Careful, Marcus, your arrogance is showing. Yes, I read and write; most people do in my time. I'm not sure how much I can share with you. I'll try to answer some of your questions, but there may be some that I cannot. As for wanting me in your bed. I don't think so. I've heard that you are in need of a wife; I hear that woman is to be Clarissa. While I may not like her, where I'm from, one doesn't mess around with a man that is married." Kit gave him a pointed look. "Nor one who is promised to be married."

He smiled. "We will take it a day at a time, my fierce one. Soon, you will beg me to take you."

Kit shook her head in exasperation. His smile was one of a predator who'd just cornered his prey and was moving in for the kill. She chuckled, mostly as a defensive mechanism, not entirely able to squelch the shivers sent through her body at the thought of being prey. *For him*. He wasn't unlike the men she was used to in his train of thought. So confident that all he had to do was smile and be charming to get into her bed.

Men.

Obviously, the centuries didn't change them much; they are still way too sure of themselves.

Marcus was different, however, in his effect on her. No man from her time had ever made her feel so much like a woman. His glances were purely masculine and possessive. They made her burn in ways she had never imagined would be possible. And the way he called her fierce one... Well, that set up a whole other set of issues she needed a vibrator to take care of. Or a man.

Her curiosity won out, and she asked despite understanding encouraging this exchange would be bad. "Why do you call me 'fierce one'?"

"Because when I found you, you offered up nothing but courage to me. Even though I knew you were scared."

It was her turn to cross her arms. "How can you be so sure I was scared?"

"Easy. You were facing me." Haughtiness tinged his tone as if he really believed what he said.

She just rolled her eyes. There was no way she was going to win where this discussion was headed. Arrogance was not something he was in short supply of. He fairly boiled over with excess of that particular trait.

Marcus took her by the arm and led her to a tree near the water. He sat down next to her and stroked the back of his hand down the side of her face. The intense reaction she had from him touching her skin shocked her. When he dropped his hand, she twisted her head away to cover the display of emotions crossing her face. *Holy shit, his touch is potent.*

Struggling to control the butterflies in her stomach, Kit smoothed out her expression. She leaned back against the tree and began to tell him of her parents. He listened aptly, asking questions every now and then but, for the most part, seemed eager to learn of them.

Marcus stared at her as she talked about her family, focusing on her as if she were the only person in the world and that her words meant so much to him. It was a heady feeling.

While she spoke of a variety of topics, she stayed away from history—well, her history, his present. Evading the questions when they came, using the excuse she didn't live in England.

He eventually lay back while she spoke.

Kit watched as he fell asleep. She continued to stare at him after he went under the sandman's lure. Marcus wasn't a small man, by any stretch of means. Quite the opposite. She did another perusal of his body. He wore braies that molded themselves to his corded thighs. His tunic was stretched across massive shoulders. Not many men she interacted with looked like he did. He was pure male, not one fashioned from hours at a gym and powdered drinks. He was true blue. He was hot.

Lord, what I wouldn't give to see him naked and in my bed.

Apparently, with the progress the world made in technology, the less men needed to work like he did. Such a shame, he looked pretty damn good. Okay, he looked damn good, no pretty about it. As she pursued his sculpted body, she imagined him in jeans or even in a tuxedo. *Wow.* What his shoulders would look like in a tailored suit, dancing with her at one of her parents' dinner or business parties.

He had the moves of a predator, sleek and deadly. Kit began to fan her face with her hand, body temperature rising. She needed

something to work off this sexual tension that had completely invaded her body.

After she was sure he was in a deep sleep, she got up and wandered over by his horse. *If you were mine, boyo, there would be a definite attitude adjustment.* She didn't have any way to bring him some water, so she cautiously picked up his reins and guided him toward the water. After some balking, she got him to follow. *What an evil-tempered horse.* After he drank his fill, she took him back and tied him up, again. Another quick check to make sure that Marcus was still asleep, Kit decided to do some capoeira, resigned to the fact that she would never make it if she tried to run.

She paused in her workout when Marauder snorted. Kit looked at the horse and walked over to him. For the second time, she cautiously picked up his reins, again, and she headed to the water with him. "Same rules, be nice to me and I won't turn you into glue." Her words were low between just the both of them. Completely ignoring Marcus, she watered his horse and splashed some water on her face and neck also. When his horse was done, she took him back and retied him.

"Are you ready to go back? I wish to help Edith this evening." She didn't even look at him when she spoke. *I don't know if I can keep the lust from my eyes if I do that.*

"Aye, we should go back. You will eat with me tonight. Understand?" He issued the command.

Christ, want me to snap a salute or bow and say "yes, master" to you? "Yes. Whatever." She stood by Marauder and waited for this object of her dreams and desires to approach.

Marcus gripped her around the waist and set her up on his horse. She knew she could have swung on but had no problem with him lifting her up. She'd barely settled when he was up behind her. He turned his horse back to the castle.

They passed a crevice where they could see some more of the jagged coastline. There seemed to be no end to the rocks jutting up and out. Some smooth, some pointed. It was strangely beautiful here. Nothing in her eyes could compare with the mountains of her home, but this place was wildly addictive in its harsh beauty.

He didn't press for conversation on the way back. Just pointed out some things without requiring a response. She knew he had watched her as she finished up her workout and was waiting for a question on it. None was forthcoming.

As they approached the castle, they became the objects of many stares. She understood all were wondering what had transpired between the lord and the “guest”. Clarissa waited at the top of the stairs. She had a gloating look on her face that told what she hoped had happened. The look died a little when she saw Kit riding in front of Marcus.

That's right, bitch. He didn't lay a hand on me. Of course, that could be a bad thing. I have an itch he can scratch. One I want him to, but because I was raised with manners, it won't happen. I know he's yours, and I don't poach.

Chapter Eight

*Gold is for the mistress – silver for the maid
Copper for the craftsman cunning at his trade
“Good!” said the Baron, sitting in his hall,
“But Iron – Cold Iron – is mater of them all.”*

-R. Kipling

Marcus scowled as he realized immediately what was going on. Clarissa was playing the mistress of the castle perfection. She ordered fresh drink and food to be prepared right away; she inserted herself right by him as he dismounted and stepped away from his horse. Not even sparing Kit a glance, his mistress latched onto his arm, leading him off. Marcus followed with the thought that someone had a hold of Marauder. When the angry call from his stallion rang out, he spun around.

Marauder was on his hind legs, front ones striking out at the air, Kit on his back. Fear slammed Marcus. No one else could ride his horse, and Marauder'd killed the last man who'd been on him. He began to turn, but Kit held Marauder's mane and didn't look the least bit frightened. In fact, the look on her face was one of excitement. She retrieved the reins from the frightened stableboy; after which, she calmed his warhorse. When he settled, she slid off and spoke soothingly to him as she led him to the stable. Not even a single look back.

Marcus wanted to go after her and make sure she was all right, but Clarissa had her claws in his arm and refused to release him. When he entered the hall, he realized why. He had visitors.

“I thought we could have your little guest sit here by you on this side, and I will be on your right.”

Brought back to the problem at hand, he realized what Clarissa was up to. She was going to try and embarrass Kit at the dinner. From the looks of the guests she was also going to try to announce their engagement. “That will be fine, just make sure that Kit is on my right, you can be on my left.” He left after that statement, leaving no room for an argument and not giving a damn about the angry expression on her face.

αβ

In the barn, Kit worked with Marauder, calming and stabling him. “You have one hell of a nasty attitude, boy. But, you're a nice

stallion, no argument, but damnation, you need an attitude adjustment." Not fully trusting him, she left him tied as she removed the saddle. "You don't scare me. I'm used to stallions, and I'm sure that's what you're expecting to happen. Sorry, bub. Not here and not with me." She had him in his stall with the bridle off when she discovered Gavin watching her, awe on his face.

"What is it, Gavin?"

"I have never seen anyone ride that horse except for the baron."

Amazement laced his tone, and she smiled slightly. "I just stayed on; we didn't go anywhere."

"You were on him alone. The last one who tried died. The horse killed him."

God, it's a wonder anyone lived beyond the birth with all the dangers. Wonder if he'll be better about riding with me, now. "Do you think that you would go for a ride with me, Gavin?"

"I will get the horses ready. Just a minute...Kit." With his uncertain look, she merely gave him a nod of approval. She'd much rather be called Kit than wench any day of the week.

αβ

Marcus watched from a window as Kit rode out of the gate with Gavin. He ground his teeth against the jealousy that rose unbidden within him. A noise at the door had him looking up into the eyes of his two closest friends.

They were barons of neighboring lands. Hugh Westerly, the Baron of Ravensridge, and Duncan Guy, the Baron of Wolfhaven.

They both had grins on their faces. The three of them had all earned their spurs at the same time. Despite the harsh times of danger and deception, they had remained friends. More than that, though, they stayed loyal to each other, even with all the troubles with the royal rulers. The trio were well-known throughout Europe as The Devil, The Raven, and The Wolf, and their prowess on the battlefield was legendary.

Since Henry I had appointed himself king in eleven hundred—after his brother William II died in a hunting accident, when Robert, king of Normandy, was away at the crusades—he was still checking on the loyalty of his new knights, having defeated and banished most of Robert's leading supporters after his invasion in eleven hundred and one.

"I hear you have a guest, Marc. When do we get to meet this sorceress?" Duncan's teasing question came to Marcus as Duncan

reached out his hand out for Marcus'.

"She is not a sorceress. She does claim to be from the future, though." Marcus accepted the hands of his friends and shook them. Both of the men looked at him in disbelief at that statement, and he understood they were waiting for him to laugh it off. When his expression did not change, they both took a seat, eyebrows up.

"Marc, you can't believe that. Do you? There is no way that is possible." Duncan frowned.

"I have to agree with, Duncan. Marc, that is really insane. How can you possibly believe a statement as such? Do you think she is a spy for someone?" Hugh asked.

"I am not sure what to believe. She dresses differently than anyone I have known; she has things in her possession that I have never seen before. She claims to be able to read and write. I am unsure of how else to put the pieces together."

Marcus occupied a seat of his own. "She just appeared here one morning. I saw her when I was chasing a magnificent horse. Big black, impressive. I lost the horse over the edge of the cliff, but she remained. Have you seen an animal like that around? He was perfect. *She* isn't normal."

At their looks, he waved a hand and restated his meaning. "The servants love her, as do the children. She has cleaned up the place; I am sure you can tell. She treats everyone the same. No matter who they are. Roger and some of the men don't seem to trust her. Of course Clarissa doesn't. Roger says she is a heathen and isn't to be trusted. Her English is different, and so is the French that she speaks."

Duncan asked, "How do you feel about her?"

"How do I feel about her? I do not know how I feel about her. At least I don't think I do. Damn, I am five and thirty. Most of my life, I have been a knight and warrior; now, I need to be thinking of a wife and heir. Not her. She is just here until I can find out what to do with her." He knew the flush in his cheeks betrayed him to the two men. "You will meet her at dinner. I have to go" At the door, he turned. "I am glad you both are here."

αβ

Kit looked for any sign of Ares as she rode with Gavin. She gave off a few piercing whistles but got no answer. They made idle chitchat on the ride back. Gavin seemed fine to be with her, now, since her escapade with Marauder. She chuckled slightly over the

change in him. Once back, she headed up to her room to wash for dinner. Kit realized that she didn't really want to go down, but she had given her word. *Never let it be said I don't keep my word, even when I'm miles from home and in a time I don't know I'll ever leave.*

Dinner had just begun when she walked into the great hall. Silence fell over the tables as every eye turned to her. Gavin rose and took her arm, leading her to the high table, where he sat her on Marcus' right side. She was next to a very dark-haired man with blue eyes.

"I am Duncan Guy of Wolfhaven."

She smiled. He was as big as Marcus, but he was clean-shaven where Marcus wasn't. "Katrina Lawson."

The man across from Duncan nodded at her. "Hugh Westerly of Ravensridge."

He was also clean-shaven but had golden eyes and light blond hair. His build was a little slighter than Marcus', but he seemed to be in just as good of shape. *Damn, they are some fine-looking men.*

With a single glance at Clarissa, Kit knew what was planned. She was counting on Kit to make some grave mistake and embarrass herself or Marcus and, perhaps, have her status changed. *Good luck, bitch. I can behave at a dinner, even if I'm not sure what to expect.* She kept her attention to the man on her right. Duncan proved to be a very interesting man, friendly enough, but on a fishing expedition. Kit also engaged Hugh in conversation, which left Marcus to deal with Clarissa. As soon as Kit could, she excused herself from the hall and headed for the kitchen.

Marcus knew what his friends saw. A dark-skinned girl with short hair, unconfined. A person with unorthodox mannerisms, but one who didn't let on if something bothered her. He was jealous that Kit paid them the attention during the meal and not him.

After dinner, while watching the entertainment, Duncan turned to Marcus and asked, "Where did your guest go?"

"I bet she is in the kitchen with the servants," Clarissa responded. "She seems to be more comfortable with the help than with nobility. I believe that shows her lack of breeding."

Hugh looked at Clarissa and then at Marcus. "I suppose that it would, just like people's manners at the table." The dislike for Clarissa was evident in his voice.

The rebuke didn't go unnoticed by Clarissa, who, from the look on her face, clearly expected Marcus to defend her to his friend. He

didn't say a word in her defense. Understanding nothing was coming, she stood and took her leave.

After which, Hugh looked at Marcus and said, "Well, I guess she still doesn't like me."

Shaking his head as a smile played along his lips, Duncan asked, "Does she really go to the kitchen?"

With a nod, Marcus replied, "She helps out all of the servants. Knows them by name and treats them with respect. They would do anything for her. I believe they like her better than me."

Hugh stood and said to Marcus, "Let's play chess; I need a good game." The two men left for a game of chess by the fire in the solar.

αβ

Two hours later, Marcus stood with Hugh, amazed at the sight before him. Duncan dancing, Kit dancing with a little girl and singing. Men playing instruments. The food the knights were given was an excellent way to finish off their dinner, for it was better than the dessert they had eaten. There was more energy in this room than there had been with the entertainment Clarissa had arranged for them. Kit was a joy to watch as she danced. She was very relaxed, and it showed. She was having a great time. She stopped singing, and the men played something slower.

Kit ran her gaze over the two men who had just come in the kitchen, her eyes flared with unrestrained emotion as they lit upon Marcus. She watched them for a moment before she went to Duncan and pulled him to dance with her. The dance was slower, and he got to hold her a little closer.

"Did you just growl?"

Marcus didn't even look at Hugh. His gaze was centered on Kit in the arms of his soon-to-be-ex best friend.

"You did growl." Hugh laughed. Then quickly shut up at Marcus' glower. "You should watch your expression, Marcus; you are scaring the servants."

The slower song over, Kit went to dance with someone else. Duncan came to sit with Hugh and Marcus. Mary, a ten year old, came over and curtsied in front of them. Marcus noticed but didn't pay much attention. Hugh, however, got up and bowed to her in a courtly fashion. She held out her hand for a dance and he accepted, much to Marcus' surprise.

Marcus looked up to see Kit standing in front of him, beckoning to him for a dance. He got up, secretly glad she'd come to him. He

had wanted to hold her in his arms since he'd seen her at dinner. The dance was fast and fun. The party lasted for a while. When the young girl was tired, they ended and said goodnight to all. Kit returned it and headed up to her room. She left under Marcus' careful eye.

The three friends went in search of a mug of ale. They were still in good spirits from the dancing.

"I haven't had such fun as that since before we got our spurs," Duncan said.

"Aye, I agree with you," Hugh stated. Marcus just nodded.

They stayed up late into the night, discussing the missive from their king. Not quite sure how to take it, they made sure to cover every angle. With good reason, they were tense and worried about uprisings. They spoke until Hugh and Duncan cried off to go to sleep. Marcus bid them a goodnight and said he would stay up for a while, yet. They just nodded and left.

As he paced the great hall, Marcus wondered what he was going to do with Kit when he left for London. He wanted her with him, but as a guest, he couldn't insist she go with him. Lost in thought, he almost missed the creak of a step. Believing it was one of his friends, he hid deeper in the shadows, not really wanting to talk to anyone, at the moment. When the figure came into sight, he started.

It was Kit. She wore the same clothing she had been wearing when he'd picked her up. She still refused to wear a dress; he shook his head and grinned. Those clothes fit her. Unique. Although, they made her stand out even more. He watched as she quietly snuck out the door. His first thought was that she was running away, but since she carried nothing with her, he dismissed that idea. Maybe she was going to meet a lover.

That idea enraged him. The thought of her with anyone else made him shake with jealousy. He followed her and watched as she walked up to the gate and spoke to the guard then disappeared through the gate. *Apparently, this is common for her to do, for my guard appears all too familiar with this behavior. I am going to have to speak with her about this. And to him.*

The first streaks of morning light showed themselves as he hurried to the barn to get on a horse, all intentions to follow her. He left quickly and went through the gate in a rush of thundering hooves, leaving the man to wonder if he was feeling all right. He headed in the direction she had gone and saw her moving away

from the village.

Alarm spiked him as he worried she might be running from something. He wished he'd gone for his sword before rashly following her. Marcus scanned the area and saw nothing out of the ordinary, but she continued to run. Drawing up on the reins, he watched and understood she wasn't proceeding in a frantic way but a continuous and steady one.

He kept his distance as he followed. She didn't seem to have any particular destination in mind. Finally, he saw her start to slow and hid himself in the woods. He watched as she turned around and came back. Marcus shook his head at her as she passed him for the lake. *She does not pay any attention to her surroundings; that is foolhardy and dangerous.*

Kit went to the field by the water and began that same stuff that she had been doing a few days ago when he had been with her. He observed. After about an hour, when the sun peeked over the horizon, she returned to the water. Kit cast a quick look around her then stripped her clothes and dove in.

His mouth dropped open.

Doesn't the fool woman realize how much danger she could be in?

There could be cutthroats around or thieves. Even him. He realized that the most danger to her, right now, was himself. He alternated between wanting to strangle her for her stupidity or ravish her until they were both too exhausted to move. From the state of his body, it was leaning toward ravishing.

Marcus' breath caught in his throat at the sight of her naked body. He couldn't breathe right. What little air he had left had been knocked out of his body. He was instantly aroused.

She was lithe and agile, moving with the grace of a mountain cat he had seen once when up in the wilds of Scotia. Her body glowed in the morning sun.

He watched as she swam for a bit then scrubbed her body. She got out quickly, dried herself off, and got dressed, again. That done, she strolled toward the castle. The cold air did nothing to quell his reaction to her. *Since I brought her to my castle, I have been constantly aroused.*

Ever since she'd started her run, Kit felt like someone watched her. She couldn't shake the feeling, not even when she turned around to return. She checked the area, again, before she took her swim, but she still couldn't locate anything. Nervous, she kept her

swim short and sweet, anxious to get back. It may not have been the best place, but she didn't doubt Marcus would keep her safe within those walls.

As she crested the last hill before the village, she found herself facing three filthy men on horses. Instantly on guard, she tried to keep her composure. "Good morning, gentlemen," she said politely, inclining her head in a greeting. All senses were on overdrive. This wasn't a safe situation for her, and her instincts were not merely whispering but screaming a warning to her.

"Lookie here. What's we gots in front o' us?"

"Looks like a servant, in strange men's clothing. Still a woman, though, so we can have some fun with her."

"I agree. Let's get her over to the trees there, men. Then, we can all have a turn with her. Wenches be wenches, no matter how they look. They all want the same thing. Don't ya, lass?"

Kit narrowed her eyes at them. "Good day." She backed up and tried to go around them. One of the men rode around behind her, and so, she was surrounded. When the man in front of her drew a knife and held it on her, she got pissed.

The man holding the knife jumped down from his horse, and the others followed suit. She backed away from the horses, watching the men in front of her while listening to the movements of the one behind her. She crouched down into the *jenga* stance and waited for them to make the first move.

"Lookie here, the wench wants it rough. I likes it that way, honey."

"Don't touch me. I don't want to hurt you," Kit said.

"She would not wants to hurt us," the leader said, laughing, spittle spewing from his mouth. "Like you can."

"She is showing more spirit then she said that she would."

"Shuts up, Henry. Don't be given nothin' away. We should just kill her and be done with it."

"I wants to have some fun with her first."

Someone wants me to be attacked.

Whatever amount of fear she had was replaced twofold by rage. White-hot rage. It coursed through her veins like lightning.

When the first man lunged at her, she made her move. It was over in minutes. Kit wasn't in the same place for very long. The three cumbersome villains, who expected an easy score, were no match for her long years of capoeira training and competitions.

Her rage flowed. Kit even told the men what she was doing to them. One of the men was in front of her when she said to him, in a voice radiating danger, "This is a Wheel Kicks Sao Paulo Special." She did an armless cartwheel while both of her feet barely missed the top of his head. Bounding up from the ground, she kept both of her feet together and hit him in his face, knocking him to the ground with enough force that he bounced. She landed upright with her back to him. Kit did a one-handed back spring and caught him in the groin when he was on his way back down. He didn't move. His lips were bleeding, and she knew she had knocked out some teeth.

Kit turned to the next one and snarled at him. "For you, a Dos Sole." She made a sidestep and jumped. While in the air, she turned sideways a little and brought both of her feet to meet his face. She heard a crack and knew she had broken his nose, and as the blood spurted from it, her own face split into a feral grin. The bloodlust ran strong and fast throughout her body.

With two of the men down, the third one, the one with the knife, slowly backed up. He looked at her and lunged forward. She avoided his reach, taunting him, vehemence making her voice drip with poison. "You wanted to get between my legs; here is your chance. This is called a Rio Special."

She danced around him, and then, without warning, she backhanded him. Stunned, he tried to launch at her, only she danced back out of reach. When he was off his footing, she jumped forward and grabbed his face with her hands. She jumped up toward him, leaping over his head, her legs one on each side of his neck. As she headed for the ground, her ankles crossed, keeping her attached to his neck, and her momentum pulled him over her so he went from standing to flying through the air, guided by the ankles she had around his neck. He hit the ground, face first. As she pulled herself up, the man on the ground didn't move.

She hardly noticed Marcus as he rode up, yelling. She was still livid; the adrenaline still flowed hot and pure. She wasn't done with these guys, not by a long shot. The other two remained where they had fallen, not wanting to challenge her, again. She strode up to the one with the broken nose. As she hauled him up, she snapped, "Who sent you? Who?"

He didn't answer her fast enough, and she drew back her arm and hit him, again

“Tell me,” she fairly growled.

“I don’t know. Some woman came and offered us money to get rid of you. I never saw her face. Please. Don’t hurt me, anymore.” Narrowing her eyes in disgust, she shoved him back down and turned her wrath on the one with the busted lips and teeth.

“What about you? What can you tell me?”

“Nothing. I don’t know nothing, either. Hims was the one that knew her, and I don’t think he is up for talking.” He was spitting blood and broken teeth out of his mouth as he spoke.

“Either of you come near me, again, and I will kill you. Understand?”

Her. She turned her attention to the one face down in the dirt. Kit shifted over to him and kicked him in the ribs. “Get up, you spawn of Satan. I have questions, and you damn well better have the answers.”

He didn’t move. She turned him over and blanched. When he had landed, he done so on the knife he had intended to use on her. Her belly heaved at the understanding and realization about what was in front of her. She turned away, took two steps, and dropped to her knees as she vomited. She’d killed a man.

Chapter Nine

*A man had given all other bliss,
And all his worldly worth for this,
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips.*

-Tennyson

Marcus recognized the signs. Her attacker was dead. The blood ran out of his body mixing with the grass and dirt, turning it to deep ochre brown.

“Kit.”

Marcus had been following her, maintaining the same distance, when he saw her stop on top of the hill. She had backed up a little, and he wondered what she was doing, now, feeling nervous. By the time the man rode around behind her, Marcus was fully enraged. They dared to accost what was his. Letting go his battle cry, he kneed Marauder and headed up toward them with only one thing in mind. To render them limb from limb. It was over by the time he reached them.

He was proud of her but worried for her safety. She'd looked so angry. He dismounted and told the other two men not to move. Marcus walked up behind her and softly spoke her name a second time. “Kit.”

His heart tore in two when he saw her expression, furious and, yet, almost sad. He wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and hold her, but he didn't, for he wasn't sure of the reception that action would receive.

Their eyes met, and he watched the rage leave her gaze to be replaced by horror. He knew it was sinking in, now, what had happened. Killing was hard to do, and the first was always the worst. She pushed to her feet, walked up to him, and put her arms around his chest. Feeling her shiver as she held onto him, Marcus brought his arms up slowly to enclose her. He held her until her trembling stopped. When she pulled away, he saw that she had gained control of her emotions.

“Someone sent them. They said they were paid to kill me. I killed him.”

Her tortured voice was whisper quiet, so he almost didn't hear her. Almost. The shock of what she said rocked him to the core.

"I just want to go home. Home, I just want to go home." She looked down and scrubbed at the blood drying on her hands like she could make it all disappear.

Fury rose in Marcus at her words, so he stepped farther from her. He clenched his fists to keep himself from finishing what she had started. He picked up each of the men like they weighed nothing and knocked them out. Taking his knife from his belt, he cut one rein off of his horse's trappings and tied them up. When they were securely trussed up, he turned back to Kit.

"Katrina, are you all right?" He took her face in his hands and tipped it up to ensure eye contact.

"Yes, I'll be fine. There is a big difference in fighting for a competition and fighting for my life. I am just tired, that's all." Her words shook. She tried for a small smile, but it didn't work. He knew the reality of what happened was sinking in.

"When I saw them around you... I am so sorry; I should have been closer. My fierce one, I am here, now."

Her lower lip trembled. "No, it is my fault. I shouldn't have left without Gavin, but I am so used to going out in the morning to run and workout. I just have never had anyone who wanted to kill me. I'm sorry for the trouble." Her voice was emotionless; there was no feeling in it, at all.

Stunned that she tried to take the blame, he felt all the anger at her dissipate. All he wanted to do was hold her until he felt better. He was lord here. If there was someone who wanted her dead, it was his job to make sure it didn't happen. He couldn't leave for London without her, now.

He noticed she didn't say anything about how he'd followed her or how he hadn't given her any privacy. He tipped her head back once more and gazed into her eyes. They were full of anguish. They glistened with tears that wouldn't fall. Marcus had never seen anyone look more innocent than she did, right then. Nor had he ever been so proud of someone.

Marcus lowered his head to tenderly brush her lips with his. He had to kiss her. He had to give her some of his strength and show her that he understood the first kill was never easy. When she didn't pull away, he did it, again. The pulsating energy that sprang to life between them staggered him. She moaned into his mouth, and his kiss changed from tender to possessive. She pushed her hands into his hair and pulled herself closer to him, accepting his strength that

poured into her from his kiss. When she ran a hand down the side of his face, she stopped.

Amazed that he had lost control so fast, he was both glad and disappointed she had pulled away. She stayed in the circle of his arms, just looking at him. She said more to herself than him, “I wonder what you really look like.”

A groan from the men brought them back to the problem at hand. “Get up, all of you.” Marcus’ voice left no room for argument. The men struggled to rise with their hands tied behind their backs.

One of them said, “I am still bleeding like a stuck pig. Give me something to stop the bleeding.”

“Shut up. Get moving. You will get something back at the castle or I could kill you, now.” Marcus’ voice hinted which of those choices he would prefer. He motioned them forward; the dead man was slung over the horse’s back. Marcus stayed close to them, leading Marauder, and Kit followed him, bringing the trio of horses the men had been on.

By the time they reached the castle gate, it was past the time to break their fast. The bailey was busy, and many noticed them entering. One of the stablehands came up for the horses, and Marcus sent a page to go get Duncan and Hugh.

Hugh shook his head and said in a joking but tense voice, “Well Marc, you sure took something out on these guys. Did they look at our lovely sorceress too long? Is that one dead, or just unconscious?”

“Dead. I didn’t do it. Kit did. They attacked her. Said that someone paid them to kill her.” Marcus’ loud angry voice filled the compound. Bringing those around him to complete silence. “These men will hang for that. If—no, *when* I find out who paid them to do that, they also will hang. I have made it clear that she is a guest here. She is under my protection; to attack her is to attack me. I hope everyone understands that.”

Duncan came down the steps with Marcus’ announcement. “You did this, Kit? There is more to you than I first thought.” His gaze was impressed, and Marcus glared at his friend.

Offering a small smile for Duncan, Kit walked by him and went up the stairs. Marcus scowled, he didn’t want to share her with anyone. With a motion to Duncan, he ordered, “Take these men away. I don’t want to see them, right now. Put them in the dungeon.” He headed up to his room.

He shut his door on Clarissa, knowing that it would upset her, but he didn't care. He paced his room, trying not to bust through the door to Kit's room. When his door opened, he snapped, "Go away. Leave me alone." His wishes were ignored as Hugh entered his room, followed closely by Duncan.

"You want to tell us what is really going on, here?" Hugh's voice cut into Marcus' pacing.

"No."

"We *are* your friends, Marcus. Let us help."

"No."

"Fine. We will just wait here for you to tell us." Duncan's declaration had Marcus scowling, yet relenting. His friends would do exactly that—not leave until he told them what was going on.

Marcus relayed his story of catching Kit sneaking out early in the morning and how he had followed her. He left out the part of seeing her nude in the morning sun. He spoke of watching her beat the men and of his fear that he wouldn't make it to rescue her in time. He even told them about the kiss and her strange comment.

"Maybe she meant she wanted to see you without a beard," Duncan offered his opinion. "I agree that it does hide your face and what you are thinking."

"I don't even know how you could keep one. They are so scratchy and bothersome. Don't you like to keep your face clean?" Hugh asked him as if he went around with two heads instead of one.

Most men wore them; it was his friends who were odd for their choice not to have one. Marcus nodded in agreement. Maybe it was time to shave it off. He'd kept it because he knew Clarissa didn't like it.

"Marcus, if I may voice an opinion." Duncan spoke quietly so Marcus knew he was back to the more serious of the subjects.

"Say what you will. I respect your opinions."

"Whilst I am not sure what it is about this girl that has you so confused and acting strange, it is obvious she is important to you. I mean, you barely know her, don't know where she is from. If you go by what she says, she is from the future. She is not like any woman from around here, and I'm not just talking about her skin color, although she is darker than any of the gypsies I have seen. I have seen a few people with skin that color. They were in northern Scotland, descended from the ancient Picts, I believe. She is very

unique, having both a way with people and animals.”

Marcus crossed his arms and waited for Duncan to finish his point. After a moment, his friend continued talking.

“You said that she said she was looking for a friend. Has she found him or is this just a plan to get you to lower your defenses? She also looks like some of the Moors that we fought against. Not saying that she is, but what do you really know about her? I would hate for you to get hurt. With the king after you to marry... A woman who we all think is going to be Clarissa since you’re his favorite knight and she’s his ward. She is a vindictive bitch, and if you upset her, you risk his wrath. Are you sure that is what you want to pursue?”

Duncan shared a look with Hugh, and Marcus understood he was speaking for both of them.

“I hear what some of your men are saying about her. Not all of it is good. As you stated earlier, Roger, especially, doesn’t like her. That could be because he has feelings for Clarissa and would do anything for her, but you never know. I just think that the longer this outsider stays here, the more trouble that you are going to have. I want, we want, you to be happy, but I don’t think that you will be with her here. Not in the long run. Taking a mistress once you are married could be done, but I think you should send her on her way.”

Marcus listened to his friend and knew he was right. Kit wasn’t from around here. There was his upcoming marriage to think about. Clarissa would probably be that one. Turning to his friends, he said, “I need a favor.”

They both agreed, right away.

“I need for you to take my men and Clarissa to London. I will follow in a month. Alone.”

That would give him one month alone with this woman who had ensnared his heart. He would help her find her friend and send her on her way. “I may have to marry to please the king, but I will have one month with her. I will take that much. One month of happiness then I will come to London.”

His friends nodded. “We will do it,” Hugh said as they took their leave from the room.

Marcus headed upstairs, let himself into her room, and discovered she was sleeping. She was as beautiful as any angel had the right to be. He walked over to her and brushed his hand along

her jaw, barely touching her, yet he felt the soft texture of her skin like a firebrand.

“One month, my fierce one, that is all we have.”

He left her sleeping in her room to go shave.

αβ

Darkness had begun to fall by the time Kit awoke. She had slept the whole day away, yet her body still clamored for more. Ignoring that desire, she rose and crept down to the kitchens. The servants there were getting ready to send a group to London. Kit grabbed some bread and cheese before she returned back to her room, deciding it would be best to remain out of the way. After she ate, she lay down once more and returned to the land of slumber.

When she woke early the next morning, she rose, already dressed in her sweats. She washed in the fresh water in her room then went down the stairs to go running. Partway down, she realized that she just wanted to walk before her workout. Kit spun back to grab her duster from where she'd stored it behind her saddle; its fleece lining would help keep her warm in the cold air. Despite having her boot knife with her, she was still a little on edge and debated carrying the rifle. *Get a grip, girl. I'm a Lawson—we don't run from danger; we face it head on. And, I'll face whatever shit they want to throw at me here. I won't lay down and take it blindly. I'll fight. And, goddamn it, I will survive.*

As she made her way across the empty bailey to the gate, she stumbled over her feet as she realized that she had fallen in love with Marcus Quinn, or was well on her way to doing so, it was only a matter of time. He was overbearing and dominating, but there was something about him that drew her to him. Over these days she had been here, it had happened. No, they didn't spend much time together, but there she had it. She had witnessed him with his people. He truly cared for them and wanted them happy. He took the time to talk to the villagers and didn't make them feel less because of their station difference. She'd been able to see who he really was beneath the guise of his title. *Guess it's true, you can't pick who you fall for.*

Regardless of her growing feelings, she couldn't stay. She needed to get home. The guard waved as she made her way out the small side gate.

She walked through the village and toward the lake then beyond. She strolled along longer than she normally ran, but she

had so much to go over in her head. Marcus. Ares. And that ever-present nagging of how and *if* she'd ever get home.

The pounding of hoof beats thundered up behind her. Startled, she spun around, crouching into a defensive position to see Marauder running toward her. On his back, Marcus' expression could have frozen the underworld and sent Hades himself into hiding. Marcus was incensed. Fury was evident along every single plane of his face.

His face.

It was shaven clean.

She could see his face, and it was one that belonged on an angel or the devil. Marcus was sinfully handsome. Marauder came to a sliding halt in front of her, steam blowing from his nostrils. Before the dust even had time to settle, Marcus was off his horse, his sword slapped his leg in tune with his stomping stride.

"Woman! What in the hell are you doing out here by yourself? You would think that, after yesterday, you would be more careful. When I found out that you had left the castle, do you know how many horrible things went through my mind?"

He grabbed hold of her arms and shook her. Kit could feel his fingers, even through her coat. She didn't say anything, just stared at him in shock. He tightened his grip on her arms and held with such ferocity that she believed she would be bruised.

Still, she remained immobile in his arms, statuesque. She couldn't move. Every fiber of her being told her this was where she belonged. She, Katrina Andrea Lawson, belonged in the arms of Marcus Quinn, the overbearing, arrogant, and dictatorial baron of Blackthorne. If there were such a thing as soul mates, this was it. She had found hers and didn't want to leave. Her purpose for arriving here became clear.

This was her one chance at true love. What little time they had left together, she knew that it was meant to be. He was the other half to her. She was complete. Clarissa may be his future, but for the moment, he was Kit's.

She witnessed his struggle to let her go. Fear existed in his eyes, and it hit her. *He was worried for me.*

"Do you have nothing to say for yourself?" His voice boomed around her.

She looked up at him, her eyes so full of love, she was aware there was no way for Marcus to mistake the meaning they held. She

reached up a hand and ran it down his face and smiled. "You shaved for me. You got rid of it for me. Thank you. So handsome. Perfect." She rose up on her toes and pressed her lips to his. "Why did you do it?"

She understood he was shocked at her absolute avoidance of his yelling and anger, and so it took him a moment to answer. "I wanted you to see that I had nothing to hide from you. You wondered what it would be like; I wanted you to know."

"Je t'aime." She turned her head into his chest and just held onto him.

"What did you say to me?" His words were breathless from her declaration.

"I said, I love you. I'll say it in English, French, or whatever language you want me to tell you. I will make up a language to tell you. I'm not sure why I love you; I just know that I do and want to spend with you as much time as I can before you have to go. You make my heart complete. I can only hope that you feel the same way."

Her words may have been blunt, but Kit wasn't one who beat around the bush about anything. She didn't have the time to dick around and hope someone would at one time tell her something she longed to hear.

"Oh, my fierce one. Yes, I love you. So much that it scares me. We have a month before I go to London."

A month. Somehow, it didn't seem long enough. And, yet, they were more than willing to take the time offered to the both of them. If only things were different.

If only.

Kit had learned not to live by "if only". One would get sorely disappointed and regret moments for the rest of one's life. She was curious if she would ever find her way back home, or would she have to stay in this time and watch her love be married to someone else?

"I have to finish my workout." She pulled away from his comforting embrace. "You can come if you want, but I will finish it."

She walked off, again. Kit heard the heavy hoof beats from Marauder behind her and knew that he followed her. Kit turned for the pond. When she arrived at the pond, she removed her coat, shoes and socks. She did her workout barefoot, even though there

was considerable chill in the air, conscious of his gaze upon her.

It made her feel unique. She had never before done a sole workout with someone watching her, at least not the way he did. Kit had done competitions, yes. Workouts aplenty, but this was different. It was like she performed for him and him alone. In a way, she was.

Her workout done, she went to the edge of the pond. Rapidly stripping off her clothes, she dove into the cold water. She bathed herself fast. It was getting colder as the days went on, and she didn't want to stay in the water long.

Kit looked into the brilliant green eyes of the man who held her heart and grinned at him. "Coming in? It may do you some good?"

"Get out of there. It is too cold."

"No, it's not. I *like* to bathe every day. I feel dirty and gross if I don't. I'm almost done."

She was magnificent. Especially how she moved with a feral grace. Marcus realized that there was a purpose to what she did. Her knowledge of those movements had saved her life. She may not be from this time, however, in his eyes, she was a warrior in her own right. She was *his* warrior.

Finally finished, she strode out of the water, not hiding her body from him in any way. She was perfect. Her whole body was a rich sienna hue, one he longed to touch, feel, explore. Her muscles were well defined but not, by any means, ugly. She was in remarkable shape. Water droplets ran down her body, giving her the appearance of a piece of shimmering bronze in the early sun.

He groaned to himself. It was all he could do not to take and bury himself inside her, right here and now. He compared her to the milky whiteness of past mistresses and found them to be, in all honesty, lacking. They appeared to be all washed out.

Kit dressed quickly. Once finished, she met his gaze and walked over to him.

"Ready to go back?"

He nodded, wanting to take her back in his arms, and mounted Marauder before offering her a hand up. Marcus narrowed his gaze when she declined to take his hand. He dismounted. He faced her, reaching for her waist. When he touched her, she spoke.

"I wish to walk. It's part of my cool down."

"It is a ways back. Come ride with me." It was not a request but a demand.

“No, I will walk.” She turned and walked toward the castle, once again dismissing him quickly and efficiently.

Shocked that she would still wave him off him so smoothly, he stomped off after her, dragging Marauder with him. Didn’t she realize what it would be like for the men of the castle to see him walking back instead of riding? It would be humiliating.

“We will ride into the castle.”

He spoke it as intended. A demand.

“Go right ahead. I am perfectly capable of walking on my own. I like to walk.”

“Woman.” The growled word came as a warning. He was getting exasperated. She was such a contradiction.

Kit spun abruptly to face him, her hands planted firmly upon her hips. “Look, just because I told you that I loved you does not, I repeat, does *not*, give you the right to run my life. I like to walk; it is what I do after a workout. I know what happened yesterday; I was there. I was the one that took that bastard’s life to save my own.” Her voice trembled at that admission.

“However,” her voice became strong once again, “I’m a Lawson, and we don’t run. I did what I had to do, and now, I’m carrying on. I don’t need you watching over me every blasted second of the day. I’m my own person. You don’t control me. I understand that is hard for you to realize, especially given this time. So, let me repeat it, I am my own person. Here, maybe a woman is just a possession to be bartered and traded for lands or money. Where I come from, that’s not so, and I will *not* become one. You. Don’t. Own. Me. Got it? I may have said that I loved you, but I’m finding it increasingly hard to like you, right now. Just go away and leave me alone. I’ll walk back, like I have done every day, and help in the kitchens. Then, I’ll take a ride with Gavin later to try and find my friend. You will carry on and do what you do all day.”

“I am the lord here, and what I say goes.”

“Oh, my God,” she uttered, furious. “You’re so damn hardheaded.” She spun and stalked off. “What I wouldn’t give for some of Mom’s soul food and a tall sweet tea. My overstuffed recliner and a damn good movie to watch. That way there wouldn’t be any domineering, arrogant, obnoxious men around. Not to mention a real fucking bathroom. Running hot water. Toilet paper. Christ, if I ever make it home, I’m not taking any of those things for granted, again.”

Shocked by the strength of her shove into his chest, he couldn't help but grin despite himself. She was a fierce one. Marcus watched as she strode off, muttering to herself. His heart swelled with delight.

It was strange this world that she spoke of being from. A place where men and women were treated as equals. She must be kidding. It would never happen. He, however, was willing to give a little for her. Whatever it took to make her happy, he realized that he would gladly do. He became conscious of the fact he was becoming what he had sworn he would never be, a man ruled by his emotions.

He swung up on Marauder and kneed him on. He left her alone to come back when she wanted to. Upon arrival to the castle, he sent Gavin and another knight out to watch over her.

After Marcus dismounted, he strode up to Hugh and Duncan. The three friends entered the great hall to break their fast together when Marcus realized he was in a good mood.

"I see that you shaved." Hugh made that comment.

"It was past time. I prefer not having hair all over my face."

"You do look a little pretty," Duncan teased him. Marcus punched him in the arm for that remark.

Clarissa came down while they were eating. She walked over to Marcus and touched his arm in a very familiar way. "Good morning, milord. You look exceptionally handsome, this fine day." She ran her hand along his jaw.

Shocked at her daring to touch his face, Marcus didn't pull away. He just stared at her in amazement. She was overstepping her bounds, now. Before he could remove her hand, she moved it herself. She simpered at him and made little cooing noises in the back of her throat. Standing straight, she took her leave of the men.

"If you will excuse me, milords, I have some things to tend to." With a brief touch to his face again, she stated, "Until later, my love." She glided out of the room, stopping only to stare at the other door and angled her head in an arrogant way as she issued a silent challenge.

The men looked to the doorway and found that Kit and Gavin stood there. Marcus knew Kit had seen the whole thing, including the fact that he hadn't pulled away from Clarissa. He expected her to say something to him about it, but she remained silent. She simply nodded to all of them and headed across the floor to the

stairs, her duster floating out behind her like silk flowing around a voluptuous woman.

Marcus groaned. He should have known that Clarissa would be up to something. He needed to go after Kit and apologize, but he didn't. He would let her think what she would, but he would explain it all later. *When they were alone, in bed.* She would hear his explanation and be fine with it. At the thought of her in his bed, he grew uncomfortably hard. Marcus shifted in his chair to try and ease the discomfort then continued with breakfast.

"When do you leave?" he asked his friends.

"We will leave in three days," Hugh answered. "Everything should be ready for travel by then. We just need to take extra supplies because of winter coming."

"Fine. Sounds good to me. I need to practice." Shoving back from the table, Marcus looked to his friends to see if they tagged along. Both men also got up, and they headed to the practice field. The weather had started to get nasty. The clouds were beginning to pitch and roll getting darker and darker.

Chapter Ten

The fairest face, the falsest heart

-Anonymous

Kit opened the door her room, frustrated by the betrayal she'd experienced as she saw Clarissa touching Marcus with such familiarity. Kit struggled to get her feelings under control, shook her head and entered the room. *I don't have a claim on him, despite admitting my love for him. I have to get over thinking that way.*

She closed the door and pinched the bridge of her nose before opening her eyes. She gasped, her breath catching in her throat. There she looked upon complete destruction.

Her few clothes had been shredded. Her saddlebags also. The saddle that had been a gift from her father had deep gashes in it, as well as being cut underneath. The stirrups were sliced off. Her saddle blankets were spread all over the room in little pieces. Her rifle had cut marks on the stock but, otherwise, was in one piece. She saw the extra cartridges spread all around.

All of her meager possessions were destroyed. There was no way to salvage them. She had no link to home, aside from what she was wearing. There was toothpaste spread all over the bed, and her deodorant was taken out of its holder. The bed was soaking wet with some kind of liquid; by the smell, she would hazard a guess of stuff from the damn chamberpots.

Overcome by the amount of anguish in her heart, she sank to the floor by her saddle and cried. Kit had no knowledge of how long she sat there. She cried for the loss of Ares, the fact she couldn't go home. She sat there, holding his bridle, and shook as the reverberating sobs racked her whole body.

At the sound a throat clearing, Kit looked up. It was Hugh. Kit gathered her courage. She wiped her face, stood, and started to pick up her ruined things.

"Who did this to your things? Does Marcus know about this? I will go get him and let him see this."

That got a response out of her. Kit spun to face Hugh and shook her head in a jerking motion. "No. Don't get him. I'm not going to tell him about this. I'll just clean it up and carry on." She sounded defeated even to her own ears.

"Not tell Marcus? You must be kidding? You are under his

protection; he deserves to know.”

She trembled with indignation at that remark. “Deserves? He deserves? This is because of him claiming I was under his protection. This is his fault. If he had more control over that damn hussy he is going to marry, none of this would have happened. I didn’t ask to be under his protection; I didn’t want his protection. I don’t even want to be here. I want to go home. I just want to go home.” Her voice rose along with the winds that whipped around outside. They seemed to rise in time with her voice, as if she controlled them.

“I just want to find my friend and get out of this godforsaken place. Back to where my opinion is respected and where I am loved. I want to take a hot shower and drive my truck! I hate it here. People are trying to kill me. This is fucking ridiculous.”

Kit took a deep breath as she struggled to regain her shattered composure. She spread her hands out to her side. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to take this out on you. It’s just that this is stuff from my family, and if I can’t go home, then I have nothing left from them. This stuff was my last link to my family. Excuse me, I have to clean this up before he comes upstairs.” She removed her coat and laid it over a chair that was not damaged or wet.

“I will help you.”

“Thank you.” She hadn’t expected that offer. Kit turned around to gather up the cartridges scattered on the floor. Those she would keep. She made sure her rifle was fully loaded before she put the rest of the cartridges in the small bowl that usually held water for her. That currently sat empty since the water was poured all over the bed along with the other fluids.

The room was cleaned, and she got new bed coverings from the servants who were most upset with the occurrence. Once the ruined items were gathered in a pile, she looked at Hugh. “Do you know where we can get rid of this stuff?” At his nod, she picked up half and watched as he took the other half. As the room sat empty and remade, Kit and Hugh headed for the trash pile.

She watched as he threw the stuff away. She held onto her saddle, making sure that there was no way for her to fix it. She had nothing with her to even attempt to fix the damage that had been done.

The saddle’s tree had been hacked apart, and the leather looked like someone had taken fire to it. Closing her heart against the pain

of what she needed to do, she took her boot knife and cut a little piece of the saddle leather to keep and handed the rest to Hugh to throw.

As she watched her saddle disappear from sight, she fought another onslaught of tears. Kit squared her shoulders and vowed that none would fall. She would get through this. Kit took the arm that Hugh offered and walked away with him.

“Could we go for a ride?”

“Yes,” Hugh answered, waving for a page to get the horses ready. Gavin indicated he would be accompanying them, as well.

They rode abreast of each other, all three of them quiet. After a while, Gavin headed off to the side a ways. Hugh kept one eye on him.

Kit, drained and empty, just rode in silence. The way Hugh kept staring at her, she figured he must want something. Too tired to play any mental games, she stopped her horse and looked at Hugh.

“What is it you wish to know of me?”

If he was shocked at her ability to see what he was after, he gave no notion.

“I am only concerned about my friend. I don’t wish for him to get hurt.”

Kit responded with an unladylike snort. She retorted, “If that is the case, keep that bitch Clarissa away from him. He will know nothing but heartache with that one. Besides, what do you care? You don’t like her, either.”

“That’s not the point. Whether or not I like her is not the issue; it is what is best for Marcus. What do you know of her? She may be just the woman he needs.”

“Right, and I’m in the land of Oz.” She shook her head at his bemused expression. “Look, I’m not out to hurt him. I want to go home. That is all.”

But, that wasn’t all. Not anymore. She knew that Marcus was her soul mate. She wanted, needed, had to be with him, mentally, emotionally and, most definitely, physically. She kept that out of her expression, however. It was no one else’s business. While she acknowledged she wished and needed to go home, she knew that part of her would be left here. She would never get married or have children. Marcus was the other half of her soul, and she would never find anyone who could even come close to him. Never. Anywhere.

Hugh grunted a response. She ignored that. A shout from Gavin caught both of their attentions. Spurring the horses to Gavin, they found him on the ground, looking at something in the dirt. The day was becoming darker, and the threat of rain loomed.

As he looked up at Kit, Gavin pointed to the dirt. It was a hoof mark. Trying to contain her hope, she dismounted and looked at it closer. It was the right size for Ares, but she wasn't positive. She followed in the direction that the hoof pointed. She found a few more in the dirt by the edge of the stream.

Elation boiled up inside her as she made a positive identification by a chip that was in his shoe. She leaped up and hugged Gavin as joyous laughter spilled from her.

"It's him. Gavin, you did it. You found him. He is alive. He's alive." Kit hugged him over and over, completely unaware of whether or not she was making him uncomfortable.

"Glad to help, milady. Glad to help." He blushed as he spoke.

"We should get moving, Kit. There is a storm coming in." As Hugh spoke, the winds picked up, and a chill blew through the air. Hugh turned and dismounted his horse to help her onto hers. She ignored him. Instead, she placed her thumb and middle finger in her mouth and released a piercing whistle.

She stood tensely, listening to the winds pick up, oblivious to the rain that started to fall. She whistled, again. Gavin went over to her and touched her arm. "Milady, we need to leave, now."

Kit blinked away the rain that streamed into her eyes and reluctantly swung up on her horse, and they rode to the castle. The rains and the winds picked up immensely. They were soaked within moments, even Kit with her waterproof duster.

Kit peered at Gavin with impishness in her gaze, waggled her eyebrows and gave her gelding his head. Gavin's horse lengthened his stride, as did Hugh's. She was enjoying this. Sure, it was damn cold, but nothing could beat a good horseback ride. Amazingly enough, it appeared so were her companions.

As their horses raced through the rain, she finally felt free. She had found recent proof that Ares was alive. She would find him soon, and then, she would try to find a way home. She leaned low over the gelding, urging him on faster. Anxious to get out of the rain, the gelding obliged, making her coat flap out behind her. She stole quick glances over her shoulders and saw that the men were keeping up. She grinned as they thundered through the village.

The trio slowed as they approached the gate, yelling to be let in. They trotted their horses in, where they headed for the stable. A movement in the door of the castle drew her attention. She looked up to find Marcus looking out at them with anger radiating in his stance.

Speaking to her companions, she shouted over the rain, "I don't think he's very happy with us. Or else it is just me." They dismounted in the stables and made the mad dash for the castle. They burst through the door and stood dripping water onto the rushes covering the floor. They stood there in the hall and realized that they were the objects of everyone's attention.

Kit whispered in a low voice so only they could hear, "You would think that they had never seen a wet person before. Or could it be because we are smiling."

"It's probably the smiling. Especially from the glare Marcus is sending this way," Hugh answered in the same low, conspiring tone.

"I'm sure to get in trouble for this," Gavin stated, but he didn't seem to upset by that possibility. Sliding a look at Kit, he added, "I think it was worth it. In fact, I know it was."

"Hugh, Gavin, get over here. You have some explaining to do," Marcus commanded in a thunderous voice. At their slight hesitation, he added, in just as fierce of a roar, "Now!"

Before they could take themselves over to their overlord and friend, Kit stopped them with a touch on each of their arms. When the men turned back to her, she spoke quietly and sincerely. "Thank you both. For today. Thank you. Hugh, for helping me earlier, and you, Gavin, for finding those hoof prints. What you both did, it means the world to me. I just wanted you to know that before you had to go and face the dragon over there." That said, she gave them each a kiss on the cheek and then headed to the kitchen to try and dry off.

Marcus watched Kit give Hugh and Gavin each a kiss on the cheek. His blood boiled. Hugh never had a problem getting a woman to be willing. What if he wanted Kit, as well? Marcus knew that, compared to Hugh, he had no chance. He tried to keep his emotions in check as he waited impatiently for them to come over to him. There was a tick in his cheek that let them know just how mad he was.

"What were you doing outside in this weather with her? Don't

you know that someone is trying to kill her? And, it's raining out. Don't you have any sense in the matter?"

Hugh broke in to the lecture, "Gavin, perhaps, you should go and get some dry clothes on. I will explain our outing to Baron Quinn." Hugh gave Gavin a push before he turned his attention to Marcus. "Can we talk while I change into something dry and warm?" He headed off toward his room, knowing Marcus was behind him.

Once the door was shut, Marcus raised one brow in question. Not making him wait any longer for the information he wished for, Hugh told all. The news did nothing to calm him down.

"After I left the training field, I went to see if I could speak with Kit for a while. When I got to the top of the stairs, I heard someone crying." Marcus' twitch grew more and more pronounced. "Just give me time to explain this Marcus." At his terse nod, Hugh continued.

Hugh halted his story as the door opened and Duncan stepped in the room. "What is going on here? What did I miss?"

"Not much, I was just telling Marc what happened today. I headed for her room and found the door to be open. I stopped in the doorway and saw her sitting on the floor weeping.

"Marc, her room had been torn apart. Everything that she had of her own was destroyed. Her clothes, her saddle, even her bag. She was sitting by the saddle, just shaking." Hugh, in dry clothes finally, started pacing as he told the story. Not for one second did he look away from Marcus' face, his rage plain to see. Marcus concurred, for his anger had surpassed anything he believed it ever could.

"When I made my presence known, she just looked at me and started to clean up the room. I told her that she needed to tell you what happened because she was under your protection. She became enraged. She yelled at me and blamed this whole thing on you.

His heart seized. His fault? Surely, she didn't believe that.

"It was because of you claiming protection that this was done to her. She laid the blame on your 'damn hussy' that you couldn't control. She was not mad that you were marrying her, but the fact that her only link to her home had been completely destroyed.

"I willingly admit that, when I saw her sitting there amongst the damage, I, as well, got very angry. I admit that I also thought she just might have been after you title, but the untold pain that was present in her eyes took that thought right out of my head. She is a

very special woman, and so, after I helped her clean up the mess and get rid of it, we took a ride.

“The bed was soaked with who knows what and there was a rotten animal in the pitcher for her water. She didn’t care about any of that; she was mourning the loss of her things. I think you need to be very careful how you proceed from here. If she was telling the truth about it being Clarissa, then you should watch out, as well.

“Gavin went along for the ride, and she spoke very little until he found some hoof prints in the sand along the river. She followed them for a bit and got very excited. When the rains came, we headed back. That is all that happened. I understand that you are angry, but it’s not the boy’s fault. He was only doing what you told him to do by sticking with her.” Hugh sat in a chair, his shoulders slumped.

Marcus understood. Being knights and warriors, they were all used to death and destruction, but for some reason, the pain she had endured bothered Hugh more than his friend wanted to vocally admit. Marcus approved of that desire to protect her. Seconds later, Hugh left the room. Marcus let him go.

As the door shut behind him, Marcus and Duncan looked at each other. For once, the ever-jovial Hugh was silent and subdued and he knew it was not just a shock to him but also to Duncan, seeing their friend like that. They both sat there and digested what they had heard. Suddenly, Marcus brought his hand down on the table in the room with incredible force. The noise resounded throughout the room.

“I was only trying to protect her. I just wanted her to be safe while she was here.” Marcus ran his hand through his hair as he paced back and forth. “It is all my fault this happened to her.”

Duncan stayed silent.

“This time, she has gone too far. It ends, now.” Marcus stormed from the room and headed for Clarissa’s room. Without knocking, he kicked open the door. The door opened with such intensity, it bounced back from against the wall, quite a feat for a solid oak door.

Clarissa jumped and squealed. “Mi...milord? Is there something amiss? Did you need something?” As she spoke, she let the shoulder of her dressing gown slip down, baring to his eyes one creamy breast. He only felt revulsion and anger when he looked at her, now, not excitement like he used to. A slight hint of fear resided in

her eyes, and she did her best to hide it but wasn't completely successful. "Is there something here you see that you like?" Her voice dropped to an inviting purr that had lured him to the bed in the past.

"Get up, get dressed. You're leaving. Now." Marcus was trying hard to stay calm about this.

"Are we going to London early, milord? I have not yet finished packing, for the servants are lazy. I shall be ready by tomorrow. Come join me here on the bed. We can pass the time together." She patted the bed invitingly.

"No! You are going. You and your things, now, tonight. I want you gone. Take what you can, and I will send the rest to you. Get out, now." He turned his angry gaze on her.

Clarissa got up and threw on some clothes, still attempting to lure him to bed. She yelled for a servant to pack some things quickly. Daring to touch him, she peered up at him with a coy, brazen look. "Is something bothering you, milord? Perhaps that *bête noire* has done something to displease..." Her voice trailed off.

"You! You are not fit to even say her name. Do not call her that. Get out of my sight. If I never lay eyes on you again, it will be too soon. You did this to her. You wanted her dead. Get out." He had shaken off her hand and slowly, ever so slowly, stalked toward her. There was no mistaking what he was going to do when he got a hold of her.

A movement at the door caught his attention. It was Duncan. Clarissa scurried behind Duncan, as she wailed, "Help me; he wants to kill me. You can't let him touch me."

Duncan shrugged. "It is none of my business what he does in his own house. You attacked someone that was under his protection. You get what you deserve." Clarissa screamed and took off running down the hall. Despite what he said to her, Duncan did not let Marcus pass. "You need to calm down, my friend. She is leaving. No harm has come to Kit; she is fine. You need to get a hold of yourself."

"Go, I am fine. I will not kill her."

Chapter Eleven

*Love looks not with the eyes, but with
The mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind.*
-Shakespeare

Finally warm and dry, Kit drank a cup of mead one of the kitchen staff gave her. She felt safe—well, safer—here among these people she considered to be her friends.

Clarissa stomped into the kitchen and glared at her. Kit sat at the table with one of Clarissa's maids. The blonde sailed across the floor and grabbed her maid by the arm. Clarissa twisted it until the girl cried out in pain, then told her in French to get upstairs and get packed. As the scared girl ran from the kitchen, Clarissa turned her attention to Kit.

"You, you whore," she spat. "What have you done to him? Did you put him under some sort of spell? How could he want you when he could have had me? It doesn't make sense." She picked a trencher and threw it at Kit's head.

Kit ducked, and the projectile missed.

That made Clarissa even angrier, her pale face turning blotchy and red. "What do you have that I don't?" Her voice had risen to a screech. She reached for another trencher and let it fly. The servants were frozen in place.

Kit snatched it out of the air and set it carefully on the table. Then, she rose as she spoke in clear, precise French to answer Clarissa.

"I will say this slowly, so you have no chance of misunderstanding me. I have done nothing to him. I'm not able to put spells on anyone, because, believe me, if I was, the first one I cast would be on you. You whine, you scream and you are ever rude. I don't even begin to know what his thoughts are, but I can tell you this, you are not right for him. I have more dignity and respect for people than you will ever have.

"You are a whiny little bitch. I tried to stay out of your way. I tried to avoid Marcus, because I believed you two to be betrothed. I stood there while you and Roger insulted me, time and time again. I did nothing when you tried to smack me. I did nothing when you sent those men to rape and murder me. I know that you are the one

who destroyed my things. The only things that I had to remind me of home.

“No more. Now, you stand before me, again, yelling and throwing things at me. Get out of my sight. Now. I don’t ever want to see you, again. I will be in this room until you are gone. Don’t come back in here. Just leave.” Her voice had lowered and grown harder with each passing statement.

Kit sat back down at the table and just shook her head. Clarissa, apparently, didn’t heed her warning. As she headed for the doorway, she picked up one more trencher and lobbed it toward Kit.

As she ducked the flying object, Kit reacted, her own anger spilling over. She drew her knife, flipped it in her hand, and sent it speeding toward Clarissa. With a loud thunk, it landed in the wooden doorframe. Clarissa’s face completely drained of color. With a scared glance from the knife and back to Kit, she then shoved her way past Hugh, who stood in the doorway with an amused expression on his face.

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Alone in his room, Marcus watched the entourage leave with Clarissa. He felt a great relief as she left. He knew he would have to face her again in London, but for now...he could spend time with someone much more important to him. For all of Clarissa’s outward beauty, she was truly a very ugly woman. He was surprised, however, that he did not see Hugh or Duncan going with the group.

He stood and watched until they were gone from sight. Marcus then went to the room next to his. It was clean, and there was no trace of Kit in there, at all. Not even her subtle scent that had been there before. It was like she had been erased. He tried to imagine what it was like for her to come in here and see it all destroyed. A chambermaid came in to light a fire in the fireplace, and he thanked her. He smiled to himself at her surprise with his show of gratitude.

The wind picked up, and the storms raged on. He headed down to the hall for something to eat and saw both his friends were there. They were in the middle of a discussion. Apparently, a very serious one. They stopped talking when he approached.

Hugh spoke before he could. “She lingers in the kitchen. She is fine. We decided to remain a while here with you.”

Duncan shoved a mug of ale at Marcus and gestured him to take

a seat. He did. The servants came out and started to serve them some food. The three friends ate in silence. They were the only ones there since it was after the dinner hour.

When the second course was served, Kit came with some of the serving dishes in her arms. As soon as he saw her, he knew he had to touch her. He wanted for her to comprehend just how sorry he was for what had happened. Marcus grabbed her around the waist after she set the dishes down. He tugged her next to him, anchoring her to his side with one powerful arm.

He recognized she'd been avoiding him.

Kit opened her mouth to protest and received a mouthful of piping hot venison. Every time she tried to speak, he fed her or gave her drink. He carried on a conversation with his friends, but he made sure that she didn't feel ignored. He made sure she felt his attentions.

Marcus, feeling her supple body tremble with his touch, was hard pressed not to take her upstairs, right now. He liked the feel of her shivering beneath his touch. He vowed that, before the night was over, she would be doing much more shivering beneath him.

After dinner, they played chess in the solar—Marcus against Duncan—comfortable and warm inside as they listened to the howling winds pummel everything outside. They sat around a small table, and Kit was held on Marcus' lap. He didn't mind the knowing looks his friends and the servants were giving them. He wanted to touch and hold her, so he did.

When the hour had grown late, Marcus stood. He still held onto Kit, wanting as much contact as he could gather. "Goodnight to the both of you," he said to his friends. "We will be retiring, now. We will see you in the morning." That said, he swung Kit up into his arms and headed out of the room, ignoring the ribald calls his friends made.

Kit buried her face into his neck, her warm breath spilling along his skin. With a little laugh, she mumbled, "I'm so embarrassed. I'm capable of walking, you know. What must they think?"

"Ah, my fierce one. Do you not realize that I don't give a damn what they are thinking? I am carrying you because I wish it. That is all."

"And, you are the undisputed lord of the castle, so what you want is what you get?"

His heart swelled at her teasing.

“Aye. You got that right. I am the undisputed lord of the castle. Your lord and master.” He tightened his grip on her to prove the seriousness of his words.

“Humph. I’m not sure I would have you as my lord and master. Being the independent woman that I am. Perhaps, you could be my servant, though. It could be that I have a place in my employ for you.” Laughter tinged her words.

Marcus pushed through the door of the room and deposited her on the bed with a thump. “Servant? You would have me be a servant. I, the great lord of this magnificent castle? You wound me, milady.” He clutched his heart and pretended he was in pain.

She smiled softly at him.

Marcus gently stroked her hands as he stood in front of her. “I am ever your servant, my lady. Your every wish. Your every desire. I will endeavor to make them all come to pass.” He lightly caressed her face during this declaration of words, doing his damndest to make her understand that it wasn’t just hollow words he spoke, but ones from the heart. He meant them.

Kit reached up with one hand to grab the one trailing down her face and tugged on it. She pulled him down to her on the bed.

“Are you sure, my fierce one? If not, say so, now, because if this continues, I will not be able to stop.”

“I have never been more sure of anything in my life. Make me whole. Make me complete. Come to me, Marcus.”

Those words coming from her mouth made Marcus realize that he had been holding his breath, waiting for her response. When he got it, Marcus knew he had never known so precious a gift.

His hardened body bore her into the soft bed under him. Marcus gathered her head in his hands and placed the lightest of kisses to her full lips. At first touch, he felt like he had been set free. He wanted to crush her to him, but at the same time, it was as if he believed she was as fragile as the petal of a newly blossomed rose.

She wrapped her arms around him and pushed her body up into his. Molding her lips to his, she expressed what she wanted.

She tried to move her head to get better access to him, whimpering when he didn’t allow it. He explored her at his leisure.

She tasted so sweet. It was like drinking honeyed mead. He just could not get enough. When her tongue touched his, he thought he might just perish, right there. Nothing in his whole life had felt so right. Pulling away, Marcus pressed little fluttering kisses all around

her mouth, alternating with nibbles on her lips.

“So full, so luscious. I can’t get enough of you. You taste so good, sweetheart. Open for me.” Her lips parted under his featherlight touches. “That’s right.”

He burned for her.

Slowly, he drew away from her. Marcus rose to his feet, bringing her upright with him. Once they were standing in front of the bed, he began to undress her. He lifted her shirt over her head, not finding the expected chemise. She wore a small piece of material that barely covered her breasts, but cupped them and pressed them upwards. It stopped right below her breasts. The material wasn’t silk but was very soft and invited the need to touch and feel it. The two thin straps that held it up were a rich azure color as was the rest of the small garment.

“What is this? What are you wearing?” *Holy hell! She was exquisite. I remember it from when she swam the other day, but having seen her naked, I didn’t remember.* He was momentarily angered by the fact that she had been going around with no proper underclothes. On the other hand, it was very erotic. The intense color stood out so boldly against her darkened skin. It left the lower half of her upper body exposed to his gaze, which he ran over the view with great appreciation. If possible, he became even harder for her. Every predatory instinct he had flared to life for a second time that night. He wanted her. He needed her.

Her hips flared and dropped out of sight inside her leggings. He pulled them down, and they went quickly. They were made of the same warm soft material as her shirt. She kicked them away from her feet and stood before him.

“Damn.” Marcus had never been so aroused in his life. She stood there in two little pieces of material, looking more breathtaking than when he had seen her in the water. The sight of her like this made his blood boil. Made him want to plunge into her warm depths.

“What are these things that you wear? Have you no shame where you come from? Do all women wear this or just you?”

With a smile, Kit answered. “These are what we wear under our clothes. I guess it would be in place of your chemise and things. We also swim in things like this in public, sometimes wearing even less.” She succeeded in shocking him. “This is a bra, and this is underwear. I’m not sure I feel comfortable giving you a clothing

lesson when you are still fully dressed. Besides, I have something *else* in mind, for the moment. You can ask questions about my clothes later. Right now, you have something that I urgently want and need.” With those words, she moved toward him and ran her hands up his chest.

He rumbled and gathered her close. She was right; something more important to handle, at the moment.

Undressing a man of his physique was unbelievably arousing. Kit took her time—although she trembled with need—enjoying the play of his muscles, honed to chiseled perfection from a life of hard work, under her hands. Kit slipped her hands under his tunic while she slowly removed it from his body, placing little kisses on his chest as she went. By the time it hit the floor, Marcus quivered beneath her touch.

She moved onto his braies, running her hands up his muscled legs. They were like steel, hard and unyielding. She glided over his hard, substantial erection. His reaction was immediate.

Emitting a growl low from his throat, Marcus shook while she appeased her curiosity of his body. Until she touched the proof of his desire, thick and throbbing, with her touch. Her fingers ran along his rigid length, and his entire body jerked. She hid her smile, not wanting to miss a thing.

Marcus grabbed her, hauled her up his body, heat flaring every place their skin met. The rest of his clothes were gone in seconds. His chest bore a smattering of dark hair. Defined muscles played over his torso, which led to lean hips. Jutting proudly from the point where his legs were joined was his thick, swollen cock. There was moisture at the tip, telling Kit just how ready he really was, as if his next actions did not make that clear enough.

He ripped her underwear, and she quickly removed her bra since it was the only one she had. When they were finally naked, he lay her on the bed and kissed her.

She tasted the pent-up passion that he held within him. He kissed her like she was his lifeline. No words were needed between them as they shared their feelings with each other.

Marcus reached his hand down between her legs and dipped one strong finger into her core. His thumb found her little nub, and he rubbed it, ignoring the mewling from the back of her throat. She trembled with longing and clenched her muscles around him.

He spread her knees and maneuvered between them. Kit, feeling

the tip of his rigid arousal at her core, spread her legs even more to accommodate him. With one swift hip thrust, he was completely sheathed within her molten heat.

“Oh, yeah,” she moaned, eyes fluttering back in her head.

He groaned aloud, and she forced her eyes open once more. It was amazing. They were made for each other. He plunged into her with a possessive and primal need. Neither of them had any desire to go slowly. What they had was an overpowering need to be joined as one.

Kit whimpered loudly as her nails dug into his back, drawing blood. She came with incredible swiftness. Her muscles contracted wildly around him as her hips rose up to meet his. It wasn't long before he had reached his own climax. Marcus growled deep within his throat as he pumped her full with his warm seed.

Short, sweet, and fire.

“Blessed hell, woman. Where did you learn to do that?” he asked, shuddering with aftermath, face buried into her neck.

Her heart pounded, and she struggled for breath. No one had ever made her feel like that. She had found completion.

She released a purely feminine sound of satisfaction. “Didn't you like it? I'm sorry but I was too far gone to go slowly. We can go slower, next time. Okay?” She ran her hands over his muscular back.

His breathing slowed. “I'm sorry, sweetheart. I will make it better for you, next time.”

Kit drew him closer, grinning into his chest. “I think I'd die if you made it better. Don't apologize; it was what I wanted. Just how I wanted it. How I *needed* it.”

Marcus rolled over so he wasn't laying on her and tugged her up to his side. He ran his hand over her body, her reaction instantaneous. Her sublime body arched to meet his caress and press closer to him. Running feathery touches all over her, he moved over her, again.

Plastering kisses all over her body, he murmured. “I want to know what you taste like.” So saying, he kissed her. She pressed up into him. His tongue plundered her welcoming mouth with zeal. He couldn't get enough of her.

Pulling back to gaze upon the woman who had just sent him spiraling into the heavens, Marcus took note of her. Breasts that filled his large hands. A patch of bush hair between finely toned

legs that glistened with proof of their desire. Her legs were smooth, like he had never seen before. There was no hair on them, at all, not even a bit of downy like fuzz. It was like touching the softest velvet or the smoothest silk.

Marcus continued his quest down her body. He placed his shoulders between her spread legs. He feasted on her body like a starving man at a royal banquet.

He licked.

She moaned.

He nibbled.

She begged.

His name rolled from between her lips with a throaty moan that encased his cock in iron.

When he delved his tongue into her belly button, she squirmed all the more. Her little groans and whimpers as she tossed back and forth under his strong grip increased his hunger for her. He moved closer to the apex of her thighs and inhaled the heady scent of her. He willed himself to slow down, to enjoy what she offered.

Marcus gently spread her, his fingers brushing the tip of the nub, and she shuddered beneath the fleeting touch. Kit bucked into his hand, trying to move him closer. Yet, he only allowed her to feel the slightest of touches from his callused fingers. He stroked her to a fevered pitch, his own control slipped away with each passing second. Each breath. Marcus tried to keep focused. His erection throbbed with demand. He derived perverse pleasure as her hips bucked up off the bed. He slipped two fingers from his other hand inside her blazing core.

She yelled. He kept moving his fingers inside her. The other hand left her pulsating nub and pressed her hips immobile on the bed. Her gasps came faster and faster. Marcus worked his fingers to match the pace of her sharp, quick breaths.

Ecstasy. Hell. There was no end to her torture, yet the thought of it ending was torture in itself.

Kit's pleading grew louder, and he wanted more. Craved more.

"Marcus, please," she whimpered. "I'm...I...Oh, God, more!"

He knew she was near. Marcus lowered his mouth and touched his tongue to the crucial point of her desire. Not satisfied with just a lick, he took the whole hot tip into his mouth, alternating with sucks and nips.

Her entire body bowed as a cry of pleasure erupted past her lips,

and her eyes fluttered closed. She trembled in his arms as she slowly came back to a semi-responsive state. She looked up into his eyes, and he was astonished by the depth of emotion he witnessed. He entered her slowly and proceeded to make slow infinite love to her, ensuring to keep eye contact the entire time.

Playing with her as he had, Marcus wanted nothing more than to plow deep into her and make her forget anyone else she had been with. As he'd felt her pleasure around his fingers buried deep within her, he'd been overcome with the need to make her feel unique. He wanted to love her slowly and thoroughly. So, he did. Feeling warm from the pure pleasure of watching her reach her fulfillment made this time all the better.

All night.

αβ

Kit slowly opened her eyes. She felt amazingly refreshed and at peace. Noticing the heavily muscled arm around her waist, she turned her head and gazed at Marcus as he slept. Deep, like the sleep of the dead. His face edged by the dark shadow of his beard growth. Little by little, she maneuvered herself out from his grasp; she didn't want to wake him. After last night, he *definitely* deserved to rest.

Once she'd cleaned up and taken care of her morning duties, she got dressed. Kit snuck out the door and strode for the kitchens where she found that all of the servants looked at her with knowing gazes. With morning greetings to all, she headed for the great hall.

She discovered Hugh and Duncan eating. The knights paused in their meal and gave her wide grins. She fought the urge to flip them off. *Probably wouldn't know what it means, anyway.* Determined to ignore both of them and their looks, she sought out Gavin. Not seeing him, she sighed then approached the two men at the table.

"Gentlemen."

"Kit." Both answered at the same time. They tried unsuccessfully to conceal more grins.

"I was wondering if one of you would be so kind as to accompany me outside of the castle walls. I wish to go for a run, but with all that has happened, I don't want to go alone. And, I'm sure that Marcus wouldn't want me to go out there alone."

"You wish to run?"

She sucked on her teeth. "Yes, Mr. Guy. I like to run. I find it helps to clear my head."

Even though he shook his head, Hugh stood and agreed, "I will go with."

"As will I," Duncan added.

Neither man said nothing of her less-than-proper respect of their titles. Something she was grateful for and made note to remember and do better.

"Very well, let's get this show on the road." At their strange glances, she said, gesturing with her hands, "Let's go."

Walking with the two men, once the trio exited the castle gate, Kit gave her duster to Duncan to carry with him on his horse. After stretching out enough, she started her run. At first, the men weren't sure what to do, so they just stood there and watched as she took herself through the village before they headed out after her. She'd peeked over her shoulder, a few times, but laughed at their confused expressions.

Kit set a leisurely pace for herself. She just needed to get away from the intoxicating presence of the castle's lord for a while. Settling into her run, she forgot the others were with her and just lost herself in the joy of running.

Both men stopped as Kit came back up to them. "Look at you two. Sitting on horses, while I am having to use my own legs." At the expressions of concern on their faces, she laughed. "I was just kidding. It was a joke. Relax. I'm sorry. I thought I could kid around with you. Never mind."

She swiftly got lost in her morning routine of capoeira. Her body sore, in a pleasant sort of way, in places that she had long forgotten about, she continued her workout and lost track of time. It was one of the longest workouts she had done in a while.

Finally, she stopped, cooled down and headed over to the pond. Kit splashed water on her neck, face and arms, feeling much more refreshed. She glanced up to the view of both men as they stood over her. She arched her brows in question as she waited for them to say something. Kit retrieved her duster from Duncan's horse and slipped it on.

Duncan was the first to speak. "What is that you were doing? Some kind of dancing?"

"It is called capoeira. It is a form of martial arts. I have been doing it since...well, for as long as I can remember. My mother taught me." Smiling at the memory, she almost missed the incredulous look that passed between the men.

"You mean your father taught you," Hugh stated.

"No, my mother. My father doesn't know it. He taught me how to ride." Kit leveled a mock glare at them, she vowed, "If I had my horse, I could ride you both into the ground."

They shook their heads in disbelief.

She nodded hers in response. "Oh, yeah. You're good. I'm better."

They shared a look. "Tell us more about this art you know." Duncan, again.

"Sit down first. Well, it is because of slavery. Slaves weren't allowed to learn how to defend themselves, so they disguised it in dance form. My mother learned it from her parents, and she taught me."

"So, your mother is a slave?" Hugh asked, as they sat.

"No. Slavery is not allowed, anymore, in my time. It just something to pass on from generation to generation, I guess, something she is proud of. Kind of like her native language. Or for you both, your titles."

"What is its purpose, then?"

"Well, mostly, we have competitions with it. To see who is best. That kind of thing." She pursed her lips. "Like your tourneys. I use it to keep in shape, also. In my time, there are so many things to make life easy. We get fat very quick."

"Oh." Duncan sounded more confused than ever.

"What I am trying to say is that, in my time, we do things quite differently. Everything is done in a rush. Most of the land is covered by cities. It is just really different." Slanting a grin at them, she added, "Even women have the right to vote and hold important places in office."

Both men watched at her with shock all over their faces. She burst out laughing. It was just too much. These sinfully arrogant men struck dumb by the thought of a *mere* woman whose voice and opinion mattered.

"By the roods, woman, do you make fun of us?" Hugh demanded.

"Damn right I do. Men. You are all so annoyingly condescending in your attitude toward women. It doesn't change over time. Let me tell you, this world would be a better place if women ran it. Get that look off your face. Men are so concerned with who has bigger balls and who has more lead in their pecker to be concerned with

anything else.”

If it were at all possible, their eyes would have bugged out of their heads. “Your language,” Duncan stammered.

“Humph. Why is it so horrible for a woman to speak her mind, but men can run around cussing and demeaning women all they want without any sort of question to their sanity? Honey, in my time, women say things a lot worse than this on an everyday basis.”

“It is not done in this time, mistress. You should watch what you say,” Duncan admonished.

Her eyebrows rose in challenge. “Since the opinion of me is not good already, why should I try to pass myself off as something I am not to gain an approval that won’t come? It doesn’t make sense. I don’t use bad language very often; it usually just slips out when I am upset. I will try to refrain from offending your delicate sensibilities, however, Duncan.” She finished with a sickly sweet smile that made both men groan in dismay.

“Does no one control your wayward tongue, mistress?”

“Is that an offer, Hugh? Many have tried, but like I told your friend, I am my own person and answer to no one. Except my parents.”

Hugh blushed.

“My apologies, Hugh. I was only kidding. Sorry.” Kit reached over to pat his leg in apology. She made no mention of his discomfort at her touch. *Time to shift gears.* “So, tell me how you two met Marcus.”

If they were startled by her change of subject, they didn’t let on. They regaled her with tales of their boyhoods. Before long, Kit was laughing so hard tears of mirth ran down her face. Both of the men told her how they had grown up and tales of their adventures in the king’s service.

αβ

Marcus had awoken with a contentment never before felt after a night with a woman. Rolling over to take her in his arms, fully intending to continue where they had left off before exhaustion hit, he found that Kit was not there. Alarmed, he sat up in bed and looked for her clothes, they were gone.

Marcus dressed in seconds and walked down to the kitchen where he asked if they had seen her. When he heard that they had seen her in the presence of Duncan and Hugh, he sought them out. Frustration mounted when he couldn’t find them so he headed for

the gate. After Marcus questioned the guard at the gate, he learned that she had been seen leaving with both men. They were riding; she was on foot.

Marcus told himself that she'd just gone for a run and had taken Hugh and Duncan along for protection. He willed himself calmer. It didn't work. She obviously didn't realize that she was supposed to be in the bed when he awakened. At his side was where she belonged, not off somewhere he didn't know. At least Duncan was with, or Marcus would have been worried about her alone with Hugh.

Upon a gray gelding, Marcus headed toward the lake. A bolt of rage went through him as he thought of her bathing in front of his friends. Her body was his and his alone. A voice in the back of his head told him that he was being way too possessive, and she wouldn't like it. Envisioning her body under the scrutiny of the two men with her shut that voice up in an instant.

As he rode hard toward his destination, he heard her feminine laughter floating lightly on the air, followed by heavier masculine laughs. Barely controlling his rage, he rode into view and found all three of them sitting under the tree. Fully dressed. Not even touching. Just talking and laughing. He slowed and took in the sight.

Never having seen Duncan or Hugh just talk to a woman, it was interesting to see. They seemed truly interested in what she was saying as she did with them. She glanced over at Marcus and then looked back at the two with her. He rode closer and overheard their discussion.

Kit leaned in toward Hugh and Duncan. "What do you want to bet that he is going to be angry that I am here with you? He'll want to know why I didn't wake him up this morning. Watch." They all glanced at him, and she laughed. He frowned in return, displeased with the fact they were enjoying an amusement at his expense.

"I'm not betting anything," Duncan stated.

"I would, but he would probably kill me." Hugh grinned as he spoke.

"You two are no fun. All right, then. No bets. Mark my word, though, he isn't happy."

Face turned down in a scowl, Marcus brought his horse closer, dismounted, and stood smugly by his horse, looking pointedly at her. She would come to him; of that, he was certain. By now, she

would have that understood. She didn't even stand up; neither did his friends.

"Good morning, Marcus. You look well rested. Won't you come and join us?" Her voice reached out to him like a lover's caress.

She didn't even appear impressed he had come after her. "You will come and greet me properly, woman. Now."

"I thought I just did with my 'good morning'. Come sit down."

"Why weren't you there when I awakened? Did you know what ran through my head when I couldn't find you?" His voice rose with his indignation.

"Told you so." She shook her head at the two who sat with her. Kit looked back to Marcus as she continued, "I always wake early and wish to run. You know that, and you have to admit you can't find fault with that, since I have not one but two men to guard me. Knights that I would wager are just as good as you. Not to mention I'm my own person; I don't answer to you. I've done nothing wrong. If you rode out here to yell at me, just go back to your castle. I'm having a very nice time here."

"I can't find fault? I'll find fault with whatever I want. Do you understand me? I am lord here. I want you at my side the whole time. That is not a request; it is an order!" Marcus knew he was being unreasonable, but her behavior just got to him.

Duncan and Hugh rose, obviously uncomfortable with the confrontation that was unfolding, eyes flicking between Marcus and Kit. Yet, they were intrigued by the potential outcome; Marcus could see that plainly on their faces.

"We should leave, you two have some things to talk about," Duncan said.

Kit rose, jaw clenched and fists at her side, and met him head on. "Duncan, you and Hugh sit. Apparently, he has no qualms about yelling at me in front of observers, and I'm fine with it, as well. Just sit down."

Not even a glance did she spare to see if they obeyed her before she lit into Marcus next. "You would dare to order me? Listen to me and listen well, you overbearing piece of... You have no right—none—to order me around! I will not trail after you like a well-trained dog, and I *will not* bow down before you. I don't care that you do carry a title. That doesn't mean anything to me, and apparently, all it means to you is that you feel you have the right to boss people around. I am not your damn lackey. Got it? I will not spend my

days getting your approval before I go somewhere. I accepted the decision of taking someone with me outside the castle, but I will *not* beg you for permission to go. It is time that you got this through your thick skull, *milord*. Regardless of what transpires between us in the bedroom, that does not in any way give you the blasted right to tell me what I can and can't do. You either accept that or I leave the castle, now." Her entire body trembled as she wheeled around and stalked away from him and his friends.

Shocked at the emotion behind her raging words, all he could do was stand there and watch her walk—no, *stomp*—off across the large expanse of meadow. No woman had ever spoken to him like that before in all his life. She'd said something close to it before, but he'd shoved it away, assuming all would be different once they'd shared a bed. Apparently, that wasn't how she viewed it, for she'd given him an ultimatum. He looked at his two friends, who also gawked after her with amazement. They met his gaze and shook their heads.

"Envy is not something I feel for you right, now, my friend. She is one hell of a woman. Brash, but, she is something."

"Thanks, Hugh. That's helpful. Is nothing sacred to her? I am a titled lord, and she throws it back in my face. I am a well-seasoned and feared knight for the king. She doesn't care. Is this real?"

"Seems to me you have a decision to make, Marcus. Are you going to give her the benefit of the doubt or demand what she isn't willing to give?"

"Leave it to you, Duncan, to bring me back to the problems at hand. I am not sure what to do. I don't think I have ever been challenged thusly before. I know I could always confine her and hold her against her will, but I don't want to. I want her to stay with me because it is what she wishes, not because I have commanded it to be."

"She didn't say she wasn't going to be with you, just that you had to quit telling her what to do. This time she comes from breeds too many brazen women. I am glad she is your problem." Hugh went for his horse and swung into the saddle. "This entertaining scene has made me hungry; I go for food. Duncan, what about you? Shall we leave them alone together here?"

"Aye, they seem to have much to discuss. We look forward to seeing who wins this round, my friend."

As Duncan and Marcus were mounting their geldings, he heard

it. A loud and challenging cry echoed across the meadow, shattering the peace like a battle yell. All three men and their horses whipped in the direction of the sound, hunting for its source. Marcus instinctively zeroed in on Kit and found her standing frozen. She was closer to the other side of the field, and as he watched, her whole body strained toward the eerie sound. As if she were drawn that way by an invisible string.

The haunting call came, again. The men drew their swords and headed their horses for Kit at a run to where she was, more than two-thirds of the way across the huge meadow. The three knights halted when the vessel of the noise appeared almost like it came out of nowhere. The sight alone stopped them in their tracks.

It was a stallion. Correction, it was *the* stallion. The one Marcus had been searching for. Big, black, breathtaking and free. He rose on his powerful hindquarters, huge hooves slicing through the air as he screamed his defiance to them all. His long mane blew out behind him, even though there was no breeze. The effect made him look positively chilling. He gave the impression that he was larger than life and looked almost demonic, especially with that shrill cry of his that pealed across the field. Making everything that it touched tremble with anticipation.

His feet planted on the ground, he stood there, tossing his large head and snorted at them. He challenged them. The stallion reveled in the action. Before Marcus could move toward Kit, he heard a piercing whistle. From deep within his gut, he knew where it came from. Katrina. When a formidable response came from the majestic black across the open meadow, he heard a shriek. The screech, this time, was human.

The three men remained motionless on nervous horses as Kit ran hell bent toward the horse, heedless to their warning shouts. When realization hit of where she was going, Marcus spurred his horse on. He felt the need to catch her before that horse could hurt her. As soon as his horse leapt forward, the black lunged, as well. They were both headed straight for Kit. If anything, she ran faster. Marcus yelled for her to stop. He tried pleading, even threats, anything to get her attention. He barely noticed that his friends were close on his heels.

Urging his horse on at a faster pace, he swore as Kit turned and started to run at an angle to the fast moving horse. The horse, in turn, swung so he would come up alongside her. Marcus offered up

a prayer that she would not be harmed. He redirected his mount and tried to get to her, first. He was overtaking her, but so was the black stallion, which without a rider was much fleet of foot.

He could scarcely watch as the horse gained on her and pulled along her side. To his amazement, Kit never slowed, just reached out and grabbed onto the thick mane and used the equine's momentum to swing herself up on his broad back, the heavy coat she wore not hampering her movements, at all.

At the first scream, Kit'd froze; at the second, the hairs on the back of her neck had stood up. She knew that cry like she knew the back of her hand. Ares. He was alive, and more than that, he'd found her. Frozen with anticipation, she completely forgot about the three men behind her.

Kit turned diagonally across the field. She knew that it was Ares by the way he turned as well to come up beside her. Her heart, as light as it ever was, lent speed to her legs. She fairly flew. Hearing her horse as he pounded up beside her, she glanced over and saw him bearing down on her. Kit reached out to grasp the mane she feared she would never touch again and, keeping with the motion of his athletic body, swung up on him like she had done so many times at home.

Not breaking or even slowing his stride, Ares kept going. She turned him with the slightest pressure of the knees, and they progressed in a wide circle. As Kit settled on his back, she crooned praises and endearments into his ear that was flicked back to receive them. She leaned closer to his neck, and he sprung forward like he had been standing still, which prompted a wild rebel yell to rise from her throat and echo across the meadow.

Kit heard her name being bellowed. It penetrated slowly, like sunlight trying to infiltrate a thick fog. Realizing it was Marcus, she asked Ares to stop. She swung off him and hugged him. The horse nuzzled her in return, his feelings also apparent for he remained close to her. As if he, too, were loath to let her out of his sight. She turned and waited for Marcus to come to her.

The closer Marcus and his horse got, the more agitated Ares got. She calmed him with a softly spoken word in Swahili. He stood by her like a very large guardian.

Marcus dismounted quickly, tossing the reins to one of the men behind. He strode toward her and reached for her. Like a snake, Ares snapped at him, and Marcus jumped back, barely avoiding the

strike. His ears were pinned back, yet he calmed with a single soft spoken word.

She turned to the man.

“Marcus. He’s alive! Can you believe it? He survived. He found me.” The elation in her voice was unmistakable. “I thought I might never see him, again.” Her hand never left Ares’ warm skin, for she couldn’t stop touching him. Finally, she looked at Marcus and, noticing the fear and anguish in his eyes, walked over to him and settled her palm against his chest.

“I’m sorry, Marcus, I didn’t mean to worry you. I was just so scared. He is my friend. The one I wanted to find.”

“Worry me? You run off toward a strange horse, and I am not supposed to be worried? Didn’t you hear me calling you? Damn it, woman, you could have been killed.”

“Don’t be silly. Ares would never hurt me.”

“Woman, you scared the hell out of me. Never do that, again; I forbid it.” At the arch of one brow, he cleared his throat.

She conceded this to him, aware she’d truly scared him. “I’m really sorry, but we do this all the time at home. I’ll try not to worry you with my riding.”

“You will not do any sort of riding like that, anymore. Do you understand?” The arrogant male surfaced, once more.

“Damn you, Marcus! You just can’t not issue orders, can you? I’m not yours to order around. Ares is my horse, and I’ll ride him any way I wish. I’m not negotiating on this. Accept it; don’t accept it—I don’t care. I’ll not stay with you if you feel the need to issue orders like a frickin’ drill sergeant. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a horse to see.” With that, she swung up on Ares and urged him on.

“What do we do, now?” Hugh asked.

“I think that this is Marcus’ problem, not ours. It seems to me, though, that she is very capable of riding that big stallion. It is a gorgeous horse, and I admit I have yet to find a horse that I could compare it to. I would like the chance to get a closer look at him.”

Duncan’s comments weren’t welcome.

“She is the most insolent woman I have ever—” Marcus stated, too upset to get the words out. “I was worried out of my mind, and she has the nerve to get mad at me. How dare she?”

“Marcus, she is fine. She told you that she wouldn’t be controlled. Duncan and I will return back to the castle. Why don’t

you try to work things out with her?”

With jaunty waves, the two men rode off, laughing among themselves and congratulating each other on not having a difficult woman like Marcus did. He remounted and followed off at a trot after Kit.

“Kit. Kit, wait. Please. I wish to talk to you.”

Kit looked over her shoulder at him and brought Ares to a halt before jumping off. He watched as she sent the stallion off to eat some grass then turned to wait for Marcus to join her. Marcus dismounted beside her, but he kept a hold of his horse’s reins since he was not sure of what her stallion would do. Hers didn’t even give his horse another thought, as he was more interested in eating the rich grass and keeping one brown eye on his mistress.

“I am sorry. I do not mean to upset you; it is just the way things are here. I am accustomed to giving orders; it is just second nature. Forgive me?”

She reached up to move a thick lock of his hair that had fallen over his left eye aside and smiled at him. “I can’t refuse you much of anything. I apologize, also. I’m so used to having people already know about my attitude and feelings, and I forget that I’m in a completely different time and place.”

“Oh, my fierce one. Come, let me hold you.” Marcus opened his arms, and she went ever so willingly into them. Kit leaned her head on him. He tightened his arms around her and just savored the feel of her next to him.

Her fresh fragrance, along with holding her in his arms, made him aroused. Marcus tried to control himself. He thought of unimportant things. It didn’t work. The feel of her curves pressed flush against him caused him to tremble with need. As if she knew what he thought and felt, she rubbed against him and tightened her hold.

“Kit,” he grunted.

“Please, Marcus. Please. I need to feel you. All of you.” Her voice was breathless.

The sound of her winded words made husky with need snapped his little held control like a rope breaking. He tied up Marauder, swept her up in his arms, and carried her a little ways off. Whipping off his cloak, he laid it on the ground, hers followed, then Marcus gently placed her on them. He positioned his body over top of hers and kissed her. Explored her. Tasted her.

Kit arched against him as she tried to pull him closer. She ran her hands up under his tunic and moaned deep in her throat.

The sound made Marcus all the more desperate to have her, possess her. He rose up off her and shed his clothing quickly then waited impatiently for her to dispense of her clothes. Soon, they were naked on his cloak, bathed together by the late autumn sun. He wanted to take his time exploring her body.

“You are magnificent. Even more so in the daylight.”

She bowed her back and whimpered at his touch, the glide of his callused fingers along her heated skin. He traced her curves, teasing her breasts, belly, and curve of her hip.

“So flawless. I have to taste you.” He moved slowly down her body, bringing it to a fevered pitch with his nips and light touches. When he got to her core, she tensed.

Marcus spread her with his lean fingers, inhaling her scent as he lowered his mouth to the tiny pearl that sparkled with moisture. Her body trembled with the first touch of his lips, and when his tongue delved deep within her, her entire being bucked up off the cloak, along with releasing a keening cry from her lips.

Slipping two fingers in her core, Marcus didn’t relent his attack on her. Not letting her climb down from her pinnacle of ecstasy, he drove his fingers in her as if it were his thickness deep within her. He kept up the pace as his tongue alternately flicked and sucked on the bead that brought such arousing whimpers out of her. Moments later, she crested, again. Her hips convulsed, and he was nearly thrown from her heated core. Knowing that she couldn’t be more ready, and that he couldn’t wait any longer, he moved between her legs and entered in her with one smooth stroke.

He gave himself over to the primal need that had been held too dormant far too long. Growling low in the depths of his throat, he plunged into her with a ferocity that was quickly met and matched by her own need. Her need was just as primitive as his own.

He was in hell. He didn’t want to lose control so immediately, but there was nothing he could do. It was her—something about her made him lose all sense of what was going on. Her velvety muscles contracted around his swollen member and made him realize how soon the thread would snap. He thrust into her and, with a loud shout, emptied himself far inside her, driving his seed to spill into her depths and settle.

Together, they were in the heaven. They lay with their sweat-

covered bodies side by side. Marcus pulled the edges of his cloak over them. Silence surrounded them until their hearts slowed down. Rolling her over on top of him, he felt his member swell with need as she sank on him, guiding him inside her hot, wet core. Kit teased him like he had done to her until he growled a warning. As she slid down his thick shaft, she moaned in euphoria.

Arching her back, her breasts thrust forward, Kit purred as she found a rhythm that she liked. And, she rode him. She was impressive to watch. Her whole body was responsive to the most miniscule of touches. Reaching up, he grabbed hold of her swaying breasts and teased the tips with his thumbs. Her hands mimicked the action on his chest.

Marcus wanted nothing more than the plunge hard and fast in her, frustrated with the pace she set. It was a slow, erotic one. As if she had not a care in the world, she was exploring and going at her own speed. As he tugged on her nipples, her eyes darkened with pleasure. She groaned and increased the speed of her hips. She was bringing him to top but not letting him go over the crest.

Never before had he been so desperate for relief. There was a sheen of sweat covering his brow as he fought for and lost the battle for control. She was too much. Dropping his hands from those luscious breasts, he grabbed her hips and raised himself into her at his own relentless pace. She screamed with pleasure, and his own cry joined hers as he came. She fell onto his chest and couldn't move. He didn't want her to move.

The whickering of a horse brought them both awake with a start. They were surprised that they had fallen asleep. Ares snorted, Kit rolled off Marcus and started to dress quickly.

"What are you doing?" His voice still husky with sleep.

"Someone is coming; that's why Ares is making noise. Hurry up. I don't know who it is."

At the urgency he heard in her voice, he did as she ordered, coming instantly alert, his warrior training kicking in. If this woman were a spy, it would be no problem for his enemies to attack, since all she had to do was smile at him, and he seemed to forget everything else. Once dressed, they gathered their horses and waited for whomever it was to show themselves. It was Roger. Marcus felt anger well up inside him at the thought of Roger disrupting what had been a wonderful afternoon. Shoving down his emotion, Marcus was careful to not let any of it show.

"My lord. There is a visitor here for you," he said with a disapproving glance toward Kit when he thought Marcus wasn't looking. "He is waiting for you in the great hall."

"Very well." *I will address his behavior later.* Turning to Kit, he said, "Let's go. We need to ride fast."

"My lord. I can ride back with her, so you can ride ahead."

"My thanks, Roger. Take care of her." Marcus gave her a hard, fast kiss before he swung up on his gelding and rode away.

Looking up at Roger, Kit swallowed her distaste. There was just something about this man she didn't like. Ares sensed her discomfort and came trotting over to stand by her. She took her time mounting Ares.

"Do you need help mounting? Do you need to ride with me?"

Roger's sneering voice grated her nerves. "I would love to have you in front of me." Roger grabbed his crotch. He rubbed it lewdly, not bothering to hide his meaning.

"I need nothing from you." Grabbing Ares' mane, she swung up with no effort. Once mounted, Kit turned for the castle.

"Wait a minute. We need to talk."

"I have nothing to say to you." Kit kept Ares moving forward.

"Well, then listen. I don't like you. I have never liked you, and I also don't trust you. You would do well to leave this place. We don't need anyone like you here."

"What do you mean like me?" Kit's anger rose well over her sense to keep quiet.

"I think you know exactly what I mean. You can't believe that he would want you over a woman like Clarissa, do you? You are just a novelty for him. His interest in you will soon disappear. He just wanted to taste what your Nubian body was apparently so willing to give him." Roger placed his horse in front of hers to force him to halt. He added in a nasty voice, "I would also like a taste of your wares."

"What you would so freely give to him, you can also give to me. I find it hard to believe that you could have hurt those men like he claimed you did. I think maybe that was all a ruse to scare off people from hurting you. I hope you don't harbor any hope that he will marry you. Someone in his position has to marry the right kind of girl, you definitely aren't that. You are nothing but a whore. Perhaps, you are hoping that he will still want you after he marries. Clarissa will never allow that. I would take you and show you

pleasure like you have never known.”

“Try to touch me like you are thinking of, and I’ll show you that I was indeed the one who hurt those men. I’ll never sleep with you. I also don’t think that you have any idea what pleasure is. And, as for me just being a novelty to Marcus, why do you care? I would think that it would make you happy, ‘cause then, you could have Clarissa all to yourself.”

At his look of astonishment, Kit continued on, “Yes, I have seen the way you look at her. You have a thing for her, and it kills you that she is after Marcus. You know Clarissa will never go for someone like you, for she craves power and wealth.” She steadied her stallion, who shifted as her agitation grew.

“As long as there’s someone like Marcus around, I’m afraid you will be out of luck. You’re nothing but a spineless pathetic excuse for a man. I don’t like you, either, and what’s more, I don’t trust you. If I didn’t know better, I would think that you were behind my attack. I’m not going to stay here longer than I have to, but just the same, I think that you should just stay out of my way. The less I see of you, the better.” She urged Ares on with her knees, circumventing the horse and rider before her.

“Oh, no. We aren’t done here. I want you, wench. I want to know what has intrigued Marcus so much he would send Clarissa away for it. Don’t think that going to him will help. I am his friend; you are nothing but a whore to him. He wouldn’t believe you. You can’t hide from me; we will be together.” His voice was low and menacing with every word he spat at her.

She could feel the hate rolling off him like waves crashing on the rocky shore.

“We are very much so done here. I’m not scared of you, and for your information, I *don’t* need Marcus to protect me. Leave me alone. There is no way in hell I will sleep with you. I told you before not to call me wench.”

“Forcing you is fine by me. One way or another, I will have you. I, for one, like it rough and am sure that I can convince you to enjoy it, as well. If not, at least I will have pleasure.”

Kit tamped down her dread at his words. Not one to back down, she sent one more taunt his way. “You would have to catch me, first. The only way you will get me is if I am dead.” She commanded Ares with her legs, and he sprung to the right, surprising both Roger and his mount, and took off toward the castle

at a run. Roger's horse had no way of keeping up and was soon left in the dust.

Despite her brave front, Roger's words hit her hard and deep. She realized he was right; she and Marcus had no future together. They couldn't get married, for she definitely didn't have the proper background. She wasn't nobility. She also knew that once he got married, she did not want to see him with his wife, for it would hurt too much to know that the other woman was getting the man that Kit, herself, loved so much. If only things were different. She loved him with all of her being, but she did not belong in this time.

As Kit crossed the bridge and entered the castle gate, she captured most everyone's attention with Ares. She controlled him with no tack. Gavin approached as she neared the stables. With a small smile for him, she swung down and led Ares to a large stall as Gavin followed her.

"Mistress, where did you get that horse? He is beautiful. Is he the one you have been searching for?"

"Yes. Gavin, I've told you before, please just call me Kit. Or Katrina, if you wish. This is Ares, my pride and joy. You'd be hard pressed to find another like him."

"He is magnificent. How do you control him with nothing on?"

"It took a lot of training. He's my friend, and we have done a lot of work together. You can touch him if you want, just be careful."

As Gavin cautiously reached to touch her horse, Kit spoke to the head stableboy. She told them to leave Ares, and she alone would tend to him. After making sure he was settled, she ambled to the keep, needing some food to quiet her rumbling stomach. As she and Gavin were going up the stairs, she saw Roger coming in the gate. Kit suppressed the shiver of dread, turned her back on him, and continued on inside.

They went straight for the kitchen. The familiar hustle and bustle of the kitchen made her feel safer. She gave Edith a hug, and then, after grabbing a chunk of bread and some cheese, helped in the preparations of dinner. Gavin left Kit there to attend other duties.

The laughing camaraderie between the kitchen staff and Kit soothed her troubled nerves. A new girl was in the kitchen, and she was so quiet. Kit walked over to her and asked her how she was doing.

"I speak only little English, mistress. I am Cliodhna FitzGerald."

She gave her a smile and a pat on the arm. "That's all right. I'm not mistress here. Call me Kit or Katrina. What language do you speak?"

"Gaeilge."

"How wonderful. Is everything going all right for you? Do you need anything?" Kit asked in Gaelic. The girl's eyes widened at the sound of her language. Kit was pleased she could communicate this way with Cliodhna to help make her feel more at home.

"No, everything is fine. They are nice to me here. Where did you learn to speak my language?"

"I learned from a teacher. I will help you with your chores, and then, we can talk some more." Apparently, her words helped calm the nervousness the other girl possessed for Kit could detect a hint of tears in her eyes as she nodded and thanked her.

Chapter Twelve

Better to stumble with the toe than with the tongue.

-Anonymous

Marcus rode for the castle, wondering about the wisdom of leaving Roger back with Kit. Upon entering the bailey, he found that the messenger had been waiting for him, for a while. He found the man with Hugh and Duncan. After receiving the missive, reading it, and sending off a reply, he sat with his friends, only to be surprised, again.

“Hello, son.”

“Hello, my son.”

Shocked at hearing his parents’ voices, he jumped. “Father. Mother. What are you doing here? When did you get here?”

Coming to hug him, his mother answered, “We have only been here a while. Your friends told us you were out with someone discussing something important.”

Is that how they put it? “Yes, I was with a friend, discussing some things. She is a guest here, and I hope you will treat her as such.”

“Her? It is a woman? How interesting?”

“Mother.” The one word was spoken with a certain hidden meaning.

Let it go.

“I will treat her with all the respect she is due. Now, where is she, and what is her family background?”

Acutely aware of his mother’s desire to see him wed, he shook his head over this upcoming meeting between Katrina and his parents.

“She is not exactly from the background that you would expect. In fact, she is probably not what you will expect, at all. Before you get up in arms, I know that I can’t marry her, and I don’t want you to be mean to her. You won’t be mean to her. Understand? She is my guest and will be treated with respect.”

His parents shared a glance that spoke volumes. He knew, to them, it meant this woman bore watching.

“Very well, dear. It will be as you wish it,” his mother said, with her husband nodding his acquiesce. “So, when do we meet her?”

“You will meet her at dinner, I am sure; she didn’t come back

with me.”

Standing, he strode to the doorway and paused. Looking back at his parents, he wished he had the same feeling Katrina showed when she spoke about her family. His parents had never bestowed upon him the type of love she spoke about. He felt a sudden jolt of jealousy at the thought of her relationship with her own parents versus his own.

“I am glad you are here.” He left the room without addressing the shocked looks on his parents’ faces.

Striding to his room, Marcus changed out of his dirty tunic and washed up a little before he put on a clean tunic with his crest embroidered on it and some leggings. Kit had become the calming balm to his nerves. He didn’t know where to look for her, although he had a good idea. *If she’s returned, that is.* Looking out the casement, he spied Roger walking with some of the men. *She’s back.* Spirits lifted, he headed down the stairs after peeking into her room and finding it empty.

He saw Hugh and Duncan embroiled in a game of chess, and so, instead of going to chat with them, he walked to the kitchens. Lounging in the doorway of the kitchen, he scanned the room for his ladylove. He spied her with a young girl he’d never seen before. Marcus grinned at the joy on Kit’s face. He edged the room, walked up behind her, and gestured for the ones who saw him to keep quiet.

Elbow deep in bread dough, with the girl working alongside her, Kit never suspected he was behind her. She was fully engrossed in her conversation with the girl, speaking in a language he didn’t speak but had heard. Kit jumped as he put his hands around her waist and nibbled on her neck.

“I didn’t know you spoke Gaelic. Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, placing kisses on her neck where he had just bitten, heedless of the stares and giggles of the kitchen staff. Kit shivered in response.

Shrugging, she turned to face him. “What are you doing in here? I did tell you that I spoke Gaelic; I am sure that you did not remember. I’m busy; go away.” She turned back around and attacked the dough with a ferocity that made him wonder what was bothering her.

Stunned that she had sent him away, Marcus stepped back and gave her some room to keep working. There was something about

her that just did not strike him as being the same. Kit had a guarded appearance to her being versus the easygoing attitude she'd maintained before. There was a haunted look in her eyes that definitely had not been there before he'd left her with Roger. Roger. Maybe something was said between them that disturbed her.

Marcus placed a quick kiss on her neck, whispered his feelings for her in her ear and then took himself out of the kitchens as he savored the memory of her trembling under his tongue, both here and outside earlier. He knew, and relished, the fact that he did have an immense effect on her, no matter how she tried to hide it.

Marcus headed for the practice field and looked for Roger in the direction that he had seen him from his chamber. He spotted him with some other knights. At his approach, all the men straightened up and gave him the respect he was due as their baron.

"Roger. A word."

"Yes, my lord? What can I do?"

"That will be all, men." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the rest of the men. "What happened on the way back here with Kit?"

Roger's eyes grew hard, although his face remained impassive as he answered, "Nothing of import, milord. We really didn't talk all that much. Why? Did she say that something happened?"

He hides something from me. Marcus crossed his arms and shifted his stance. "No, she spoke of nothing. Her expression was one of concern. Thanks for seeing her back here." Marcus walked toward the gate, leaving Roger standing there alone.

Entering the gatehouse, Marcus asked for the guard who had been on duty when he had ridden in alone. When he came to him, Marcus gestured for him to take a seat.

"Were you still on duty when Kit came back?"

"Yes, my lord." The guard sounded worried.

"Did it look like she and Sir Roger were having an argument?"

"Sir Roger, my lord? No. She rode in alone, milord. Sir Roger arrived about ten minutes after she did. She looked distracted, like she had something that concerned her on her mind. She smiled right quick when she saw Gavin and went with him to the stable."

"Thank you, Thomas. That will be all."

"Yes, milord."

As he watched the guard walk off, Marcus' mind ran full speed. What had happened between them, and why hadn't Roger told him

that she'd ridden in alone? Damn, he was supposed to be protecting her. Of course, Kit was headstrong and could have ridden off. Why? Something was going on. But, what?

As the dinner hour approached he headed back into the castle. Walking to the tables, he saw his parents sat at the places of honor, and Duncan and Hugh were next to them. He took his seat, and the serving began. There was still no sign of Kit. With his mother's questioning look, he motioned to a servant and whispered in her ear. At her nod, she returned to the kitchen.

Well into the second course, something made him look up. Kit stood in the doorway. Marcus lost his breath at the vision before him. It was her, and yet, at the same time, it was not. Kit wore a dress. The fabric clung to her every curve in a way that hid while it enhanced everything she had to offer.

The eye-catching silver chemise had a sapphire blue bliaut, which was slightly longer than knee length, over it. Emblazoned upon her left breast and heart, embroidered in silver thread, was his crest. She was radiant.

His heart leapt to his throat, and he sat there for an endless minute in astonishment. After he came to his senses, Marcus rose and went to take her hand. He led her to his chair and sat her in it, ignoring the other gazes of everyone else in the room.

The color of the fabric contrasted masterfully with her skin tone, and she appeared ethereal. Everyone in the room stared at her. A servant quickly brought another chair and sat it next to his, so Marcus sat next to her. He didn't want to let go of her.

"You are full of surprises, aren't you, fierce one?" She tensed. "No, no, do not get upset. It was a compliment. You fairly took my breath and that of every man here away." Marcus wanted nothing more than to take her upstairs to his chamber and show her what that look did for him. In every sense of the word.

"Mother. Father. This is Katrina." Pride filled his voice. Both of his parents seemed to be at a loss for words.

She drew in a deep breath, and he saw her receive some sort of courage with it. She gave a small nod and spoke with a soft drawl. "It is my honor to meet you both."

Marcus observed his mother's pinched face, her disapproval strong.

His father pulled himself together faster. "I am Lord Gerald. This is my wife, Lady Jocelyn."

“You must call me Kit, and you as well, ma’am.”

They exchanged mundane talk during dinner. Marcus could not seem to keep his hands off her. He fed her from his trencher and gave her drink from his mug. His hand was constantly touching her face, and his gaze could be called nothing but gentle and full of love. None of which went unnoticed by anyone in the room, from the servants to the parents of the lord of the castle. He didn’t care.

They sat around the solar after dinner, and the men spoke of political things. Extracting her hand from Marcus’, Kit stood and said, “If you will excuse me. Ma’am. Sir. Again, it was both an honor and a pleasure to meet you.” She executed a perfect curtsy; where she learned that, Marcus had no idea. Kit then turned to Marcus, nodded at him and bid him goodnight.

As she walked away, he called out after her. “Where are you going, Kit?”

“To change and then help in the kitchen, like I do every night. Then, I will finish the story I was telling to the children.” She did not turn and look at him when she left and headed up the stairs. Her voice was strong, and it showed she had no problems admitting where she was going or what she was going to be doing.

His mother’s outraged gasp came. “The kitchens? Is she a servant?”

“No, Mother. She is not a servant. She was raised to help with cooking and cleaning. She helped with dinner, as well.”

“That won’t do, at all. You have to get rid of her. She works with the servants. She even looks like a servant. That dress did not hide what she truly is.”

“And, what would that be, Mother?” His voice was chillingly deceptive as he awaited her answer. “I think that she was stunning. She wore my colors and my emblem, which is a mark of respect for me. I am very pleased. Very.”

“Your mother is just tired from the travels to get here, son. She didn’t mean anything by it. I think that she is fetching. I like her. She is different, though, I will say that. I do also agree that she was stunning. I have never before seen the like; those colors only enhanced her beauty.”

“Gerald, how can you agree—?”

“Enough. No more out of you, woman. It is not our place to say anything.” His father sent his wife a warning glance.

“He is my son; that gives me every right.”

“Don’t forget that your son is here listening to you both talk about him like he isn’t around.” Marcus was getting upset. “I know that I can’t marry her. I never said I wanted to marry her.”

At that revelation, his mother seemed to calm a little bit. Whereas Duncan and Hugh looked very uncomfortable, for some reason. He raised an eyebrow at them, and when Duncan gave an almost imperceptible nod toward the entrance to the hall, his heart sank. Marcus moved his gaze and noticed Kit going through to the kitchen entrance. He knew within the depths of his soul that she had heard him, and yet, she gave no indication of such.

She was redressed in her “man clothes” and walked on with her head held high and her back straight with shoulders squared.

Fixing his parents with a stare that could have frozen hell, he stated, “I am not going to repeat myself. You will treat her with respect.” He ignored the huff of indignation from his mother.

As he refocused to finish the chess game, he realized he needed to make sure that she was all right. He knew that what he said hurt her. Remembering the triumphant look that came over Roger’s face when he made that unfortunate statement gave him even more of a pause. It was time to give her something to try and smooth things over. And, he knew he had just the thing.

Kit worked like she had demons to excise. She’d heard Marcus’ statement, and it hurt. Of course, she couldn’t be the type to marry him, but it had just been so long since she had felt the stain of prejudice this badly. Oh, how she wanted her parents. To hear her mother’s soft lilting voice or to be held in her father’s strong embrace where nothing could hurt her. Kit made sure to thank the women for the dress they’d made for her and walked up to her room. Unfortunately, indecision laced her about whether or not she should stay there. She turned around and made her way for the stable.

Marching back through the hall, Kit did not acknowledge anyone. She beelined straight for the big heavy doors. She could feel their eyes on her but kept hers forward and continued on. Kit knew it was cold, so she swung on her duster and strode out into the dark, bitter night without missing a step.

αβ

Marcus and his friends stayed up late for a while after his parents retired. He knew he waited for Kit to come back in, but the later it became, the more nervous Marcus got. His friends knew but

did not say anything. Finally, they took their leave, as well. Around midnight, he headed for his room, taking the time to peek into hers, and found it empty. His gift to her lay there on the bed, untouched. Unacknowledged.

Marcus decided to wait for her. He moved the gift to the floor and climbed into the bed. He would wait a few more moments then go look for her. The air was close to freezing, and he wondered where she was. Was she warm enough? He fell asleep, waiting for her to return.

The sunlight streamed in onto the bed, waking him. Slightly disoriented, he looked around and realized he was not in his room. This was Kit's room, and she still wasn't here. He bolted up with alarm. *I cannot believe I fell asleep. I was supposed to go look for her. What if she is hurt and needs me?* Since he was already dressed, he hurried downstairs to check the kitchens. Nothing. None of the servants had seen her, and he could tell they blamed him, for there were no smiles for him this morning. They were acting like they had before she showed up, back when Clarissa was around. He did not like it, at all.

Recalling her penchant for running, Marcus hastened to the stables to get a mount, so he could ride her usual path. He berated himself the entire time.

How could I have ignored my responsibility to her? What kind of knight am I?

When he entered, he saw the stableboys going about their work, but they did so very quietly. One of them looked at him and put his finger to his lips. He raised his eyebrows in silent question, the boy led him down one of the aisles. They stopped by the big stall Kit had put Ares in.

He looked over the stall door and saw her in a corner, curled up in the straw. Ares raised his large head and stared at Marcus with a baleful gaze. Marcus started to open the stall but stopped when the the horse's ears went flat back.

"She has been there all night. We tried to go in and put a blanket on her, but he wouldn't let us near her."

Marcus glanced down at the lad who spoke to him in hushed tones. He answered, "That's all right. I believe he still thinks she is in danger. She must be cold, though." He was trying to figure out a way to get to her.

"I am sure she was warm enough, my lord. When we came in

this morning, he was lying right next to her. Like they was sharing heat. That sure is some horse she gots. I would give me left arm for one.” He broke off suddenly as if he realized with whom he was speaking.

Marcus nodded his agreement with the lad. That horse would obviously die before he hurt her or let anything else do so, as well. The confused knight just stood there and wondered what to do about getting in the stall to her. Trying again, he slowly lifted the latch on the door, only to be faced with the stallion flattening his ears, shaking his head and pawing at the straw. He calmed down as soon as Marcus backed off. He knew that he could just bust in there but did not want to take the chance that the horse would step on Katrina by accident. He was at a loss.

Marcus walked down the stable to think of another way to get into her. On his way back down, he realized he should just wake her up. It was too early for his friends or family to get up, so he could just wait here and not answer any of their questions of why she was sleeping in the stable. Going back to the stall, Marcus peered in, and to his astonishment, he saw Gavin placing a blanket over her. As the squire backed out of the stall, he patted the big stallion on the neck and then, when he saw Marcus, gave a little jump.

“Good...good morning, my lord. I was just trying to make sure she was staying warm. Don’t mean no harm by it.”

“It’s fine, Gavin. I was just going to do that.” Unwilling to admit to the boy that he couldn’t get close to the stallion, Marcus just let him think he was going to do the same thing.

“No problem, milord. I like her; she is real nice to me. Teaching me to read an’ all.”

“To read? Is that so?” News which surprised Marcus.

“Is that wrong, my lord? She said that it was all right with you. I hope I did not do anything wrong.”

He had said it was something that could be done, did he? She had some explaining to do. “No, it is not a problem, Gavin. Learn what you can from her. She is very smart.” A bit too smart for her own good, sometimes, but smart, nonetheless.

“That she is, my lord. At first, I did not want to listen to her, being a woman and all, but I found that she both reads and writes in nine languages. She is teaching me English and Latin. Reading and writing in both.”

Nine languages? Is this possible?

The lad's enthusiasm was obvious. Marcus never really thought anyone would wish to read or write. With a small smile for the squire, he just shook his head. Marcus seemed to be losing control of his own vassals, knights and serfs, as well. All of his people had come to love this oddity of a woman. Kit was a storm that rolled through his castle and turned damn near everyone into her devoted servant.

Kit came awake slowly. Very stiff and disoriented, she looked around at her surroundings. At her miniscule movements, Ares came over and leaned down and nuzzled her face with a whicker of greeting. *The stable, how fitting. I even have straw in my mouth.* It had been a while since she'd slept in a stable, but last night was not one for her to sleep in the room she had been given. It just didn't seem right. Kit rose slowly, leaning on Ares for support. Her body felt sorer than after a day of competition. She had never before wished so much for a hot shower with massaging water panels.

Slowly stretching to get limber, Kit yawned as her stomach rumbled. Loudly. Kit patted her horse and said, "Well, hell, Ares. I'm really hungry. Don't suppose you'd care to share some of your grain with me, would you, big guy?" At his responding snort, she added, "Well, fine, then. Be that way, but see if I share with you once we get home. All those carrots, apples and oh, yes, even sugar cubes. All mine, mister. All mine."

Ares placed his broad head on her chest. He shoved her back, a move that was accompanied by another snort. He stamped one huge hoof and tossed his large head. His move sent his mane flying, his position on her thoughts made perfectly clear.

Kit burst into much needed laughter as she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "You know I'm kidding. I love you too much to do that to you. Let's go for a ride. I bet we could both benefit from a run. I missed you. Glad you came back, old man." Her tone dropped to a mere whisper. "You had me worried for a while there."

He snorted, again, and she chuckled, voice returning to normal. "All right, all right. Let's get to gettin'." They turned to go out the stall door. He was there. Marcus.

Opening the door, she walked past Marcus with nary a word spoken between them. Kit kept Ares between herself and the lord of the castle. Sure, it was childish, and yet, not really wanting to face

him, she did it, anyway. Once in the aisle, Kit swung up on his back and urged him toward the morning light. They rode for the gate and disappeared through it like the wind.

Marcus had stood there, listening to her chatting to her demon horse as if the creature understood the words she spoke. Surprisingly, Ares did appear to understand her every word. Marcus had noticed the look in her eyes when she glanced at him across the wide expanse of a horse's back, not with cold eyes but emotionless. It scared him. He accepted he didn't have much time left with her, and all he seemed to be capable of doing was hurt her.

Calling for his gelding to be readied, Marcus went after her. He rode slowly through the village, so she did not think he was mad at her. When he saw her riding ahead of him in the meadow, he stopped to watch her. She rode for the pure pleasure of riding, and it showed in her movements. The two of them, extraordinary woman and her diabolical horse, moved together so well it was like one. As he watched, she encouraged Ares into a gallop and, then, stood on his back. Kit rode that way, for a while, arms stretched out to greet the morning sun, and Marcus felt his heart stop. She was going to kill herself riding like that.

She did no such thing. After a bit, she sank gracefully back down and rode Ares toward the lake. Together, they frolicked in the water along the edge, cooling down from the ride there. Finally, she turned toward the castle and stopped the horse. She leaned low over his muscular neck that was dark as soot and wrapped her hands well within his full-bodied mane.

All at once, the horse exploded. He tore across the ground like an arrow shot from a large bow, becoming nothing but a black blur. Kit almost lost from sight in the flowing mane as they flew past Marcus without even slowing. If anything, they went faster. She vanished from his view in no time.

Chapter Thirteen

Had sigh'd to many, though he loved but one

-Lord Bryon

Kit slowed Ares down before arriving at the castle. She praised him and walked him through the village to cool him down. Entering in the courtyard, she smiled at the stablehands who came out to greet her. She gave greetings to them all then saw to the care of her horse. After making sure he was fed, she went for the castle to take care of herself.

Kit hurried straight for the kitchens, where she grabbed some food from the servants. All of them were very glad to see her. She requested a hot bath, ignoring the shaking of heads from the ones who thought her crazy. Leaving the kitchens, she found Gavin and asked him a question, when he acquiesced and left, she headed up to her room.

He was sitting at the top of the stairs. Marcus. Inwardly groaning, Kit continued up until she was eyelevel with him. Arching one brow in question, she waited for him to say something.

“We need to talk.”

“Fine. After my bath.”

“No, now. Come with me to my room.”

Another demand. One that was obvious he did not believe would be disobeyed. Too tired and filthy to argue, she nodded. He stood and held out his hand to her. Ignoring it, she continued up the stairs to his room.

Once in his room, he shut the door. She just waited, not saying a word. He gestured to a chair. “Please sit.”

“Just get on with it. I’m tired, and I want to take my bath while the water is still hot.”

“I wanted to apologize for dinner, last night. My mother sometimes forgets her mouth—”

“Don’t apologize for her. People will say what they will. That is a fact. Besides, it wasn’t her that said anything new to me. I have heard things much worse than that.” Giving him a pointed look, she added, “I have heard things that *hurt* much worse than that.” She walked to the connecting door between their rooms, opened it and slipped through, shutting it quietly behind her.

When the servants left, Kit quickly disrobed and lowered herself

into the tub of steaming water. Groaning in ecstasy, she sank up to her neck and let the heat work out her knots and tension. She picked up the scented soap that was left for her and washed herself. It smelled like lilies.

As Kit rose up for the last time from rinsing her hair, Marcus stood there. In his hands, he was holding a large drying cloth out for her. In his eyes, she saw what he would like to be doing to her. She remained concealed in the soapy water.

“Please. I just want to finish talking. I don’t want you to catch your death because you are cold. The weather is too chilly for you to stay wet too long. Come out. I have a fire lit for you, and when you are drying off, we can talk.”

Not really seeing any way to get out of this, she nodded. “Turn around and leave the towel there. I am not getting out with you watching me.”

“I have already seen what you have to offer. Why, now, do you act shamed?”

Silver eyes flashed dangerously. “I’m *not* ashamed. You see what I offer only if I want you to. You have no right to see me if I chose you not to. It’s my body, not yours. Turn around.”

Marcus granted her this little demand when he wanted nothing more than to stare upon her. He placed the cloth on a chair by her then turned his body away. It was one of the hardest things he had ever done. Her scent, smelling of a light flower, wafted toward him, and his body hardened even more in response. Thinking of mundane thoughts, he tried hard to rein in his body’s reaction. Telling himself that getting this misunderstanding resolved was the most important thing, he walked toward the fire and stood facing it until he got his body under control.

Settling down on some furs in front of the fire, she kept her enchanting body hidden from his gaze. Turning her head toward him, she looked expectantly at him.

Suddenly, he was not sure how to proceed. Never before had he come across something like this. Marcus wanted her to understand how he felt, but he was not sure how to make her see his point of view. He was a warrior, not a poet. “How are you? Is everything –?”

“Please tell me you did not interrupt my bath to ask me something that dumb. I just got done talking to you in your room. You know how I’m doing. What was so blasted important that you came in here?” Annoyance colored her tone.

“I...I was... I just wanted to let you know that I...I...” Marcus couldn’t find the words.

With a gentle touch on his arm, she encouraged him toward her. When soft gray eyes met his, he realized that she understood and all was forgiven. Cupping his face in her hands, she drew him down for a kiss. Lips touched as their world spun away, and they were lost to all but each other. He wrapped his arms around her and brought her in closer, but she drew back from his warm mouth. Kit cuddled into his chest, turned her head and looked at the burning fire. He rested his chin on her head, inhaling the scent of the soap intermixed with her own clean scent.

This was what he had been searching for, this feeling of ease and satisfaction, just holding her in his arms. They stayed like that, for a while, just content to be held by one another. When the knock came at the door, Marcus called out for them to enter but did not relinquish his hold on her, neither did she try to leave the protective circle of his arms.

It was Gavin. The squire faltered in the entrance at the sight of them in each other’s arms. He came in quickly when Marcus waved him in but seemed very shy about entering the room. “What do you need, lad?”

“I was just going to see if they worked for her or not, my lord.”

Kit turned her head and smiled at Gavin. “They are wonderful. Thank you very much. They fit me perfectly.”

“You are welcome, milady.” Bowing to his lord, the boy backed out of the room.

“What was that about?”

“I thought you knew. I’m wearing some of his clothes. Mine were so dirty, and I wasn’t going to wear a dress, again, so I asked him to lend me some of his.”

That was a shock. He hadn’t noticed when she came up to him. Marcus set her away from him then glanced at her attire. Damn! The leather fit her like a second skin. All of her attributes were noticeable. He choked down his first response, which would have been the demand to take them off.

“I see.” The words were uttered from between clenched teeth. Merciful heavens, he wanted her even more seeing her in those clothes.

Kit arched her eyebrows in challenge. “Is that all you have to say? Nothing else?”

Gritting his teeth and clamping his jaw together, he wordlessly shook his head.

She smiled then reached up, kissed him quickly and walked over to the chair by the basin where she had bathed. She picked up a second tunic and switched it with the one she had on. It was larger and hung on her, covering her a little better.

He looked around the room, trying to get a hold of himself. He spied her gift on the floor by her bed. A smile on his face, he turned to her and crooked his finger at her. "Come here."

Willingly, she went back into his arms. He took a moment to brush a kiss over the top of her head.

"I have a gift for you. Stay here and keep your eyes closed. All right?"

"All right." She shut them and laced her fingers in front of her body. When he came and took her arm, he checked to make sure they stayed closed then he turned her body into the position he wanted. Standing behind her with his hands possessively on her waist, he said, "All right. Now, you can look."

She gasped.

For a moment, she just stood there then tears started to stream down her face. He'd fixed it the best he could, or rather had the leatherworker fix it. To where it looked almost new. She touched it reverently as if it would disappear from her sight.

"Oh, Marcus," she sighed. "How? When? How? Oh, thank you." She launched herself into his arms and hugged him with all of her strength.

"Hugh showed me where you threw it, and I took it to a carpenter and a leather workman. I hope it is good enough." Her reaction pleased him to no end.

"I am sure it is. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." She kissed him after every thank you.

He grinned. "If I had known how you would respond, I would have done this a while ago." He squeezed her tightly and placed featherlight kisses all over her face.

Wriggling out of his grasp, she inspected her saddle. He watched her go over it meticulously. She continually glanced between him and the saddle before her, fingers trailing over the leather with affection.

"This is amazing work. Whomever did this should be commended for their craftsmanship. I wish to go riding, now. Will

you come with me?"

Chuckling her under the chin, he nodded. "If you wish to ride, then that is what you shall do. I cannot deny you anything, fierce one."

That admission proved to Marcus that there was nothing he wouldn't do for her. He had finally become one of those men he had sworn he never would. One ruled by love. Marcus moved to pick up the saddle, only to come to a halt when she placed her hand on his.

Glancing at her in question, he saw desire smoldering in the depths of her eyes to which his own body immediately responded. Forgetting about the ride, he pulled her into his arms. They apologized and said their thanks in many different ways, both fiercely and gently. They remained in the chamber for another two hours.

Finally emerging from the room, the two lovers saw Gavin waiting by the stairs with Duncan and Hugh. Marcus' friends merely raised their brows at the sight of them. Kit had the saddle swung over her shoulder and had a very contented glow about her. Marcus followed her out of the room, ignoring the knowing looks his friends bestowed upon them. He was confident he had his own contented glow about him.

Passing the men, Kit offered them smiles but did not stop.

Duncan and Hugh fell into step with Marcus as Gavin hurried to catch up to her.

Kit strode into the stable and headed for her horse. At his whinny of welcome, she entered and hugged him. *Everything is damn near perfect. Hot ass man to share a bed with, who's not only a considerate lover but a damn good one. Ares back with me and my gear fixed after having been destroyed. Now, if I could just get some indoor plumbing, it may not suck to high heaven.*

Taking the brushes from Gavin, she groomed Ares quickly and got a pad to put under the saddle. In no time at all, she had him saddled. She made sure that the breastplate was secure and the girth was tightened.

After slipping on his bridle, Kit led him out of the stall as he worked the bit in his mouth. Walking down the aisle, she noticed that all of the boys were looking at her. She understood why—Ares was an impressive sight all decked out in his gear. And, he was showing off, high stepping, neck arched and ears forward he

pranced beside Kit. She stopped by one of the boys and whispered a request in his ear. As he ran off, she walked out and waited for Marcus.

Marcus and his friends called for their horses to be saddled and got ready to go. When the boy came back, he had the rope in his hands. Kit deftly gathered it and secured it on the saddle. Then, without any help, she mounted. Smiling, she looked over at her escort and headed toward the gate. Marcus' parents watched them as they left the courtyard.

Before the group got to the gate, however, a childish scream pierced the air. Reining Ares to a halt, she looked for the one that emanated the noise. She spied Mary, the young child from the night they danced in the kitchen, running across the courtyard toward her. Mary showed no notice of the horses as she made for a beeline for her newfound friend, Kit. She skated to a stop and lost her balance by the large deadly feet of Kit's stallion. As she fell, she grabbed onto Ares' leg. Her mother screamed in fear.

Her horse lowered his head and nuzzled the young girl. *Thank God he's steady.*

Mary threw her arms around his lowered neck and whispered into his ear.

"Mary, you should be more careful coming across the courtyard," Kit said, gently swinging down. She ensured there was enough edge to her voice that the child knew she was extremely serious. "Would you like to come for a ride? If your mom says you can, I'll take you with me." With a huge grin on her face, Mary ran back to her mom to get her assent. After she did, she came back across the yard, at a walk, this time, and stopped before Kit and Ares.

She lifted the girl into the saddle before swinging up behind her. While Mary looked and oohhed over the saddle, Kit nodded to her mother then went through the gates without another look at the men who would accompany her.

Marcus had been sure his heart was going to stop when he saw the little child run up to that black demon Kit rode. Had that been Marauder, the child would have been trampled to death. When all Ares did was lower his head and nuzzle her, Marcus knew he was not the only person in the yard who was astonished. With a motion for his friends to come along, they all proceeded out of the gate, following the object of the castle lord's affection.

Once outside of the gate, Marcus rode up alongside Kit and eavesdropped on her conversation with Mary.

"You have a strange saddle." The child's tone held her excitement.

"For here, yes, but at home, this is very normal." Marcus hated the reminder she had a different place to be.

"What is this thing here?"

"That is the saddle horn. See, this is a working saddle. The horn there makes it so when I lasso something, usually a cow or another horse, I can wrap the rope there and the animal won't get away. It also helps to protect my hands that way for the rope can't be pulled fast and burn me."

"Why would you want to put a rope on a cow? That sounds silly. Aren't they already caught?" Mary looked over her shoulder at Kit.

Marcus hid his smile. *The child asks good questions. My leatherworker also asked about her saddle and its differences.*

"At my home, we do that for a living. We gather them and sell them along with horses. That is how I caught Ares here. I was on another horse and put a rope around his neck. The other horse helped by making it so he could not pull me over."

"Oh, I think I get it. It helps you stay on."

"Yeah, something like that." She ruffled her golden locks with a smile.

"Do you have lots of horses? I like horses, but since Mommy is a servant, we don't got one."

"Yes, we have many, many horses. My parents raise them for money. I like horses, too."

"He is different than the other ones around here."

A brilliant smile crossed Kit's face, reminding him again about her beauty. She didn't play up to it as some, but it shone through.

"Ares? Yes, he is. He's a different type. It would be kind of like Baron Quinn's warhorse and the horse he is riding today. Different."

"Aye. I see that, now." The young child sounded ever so worldly in her declaration.

Marcus and the others were intrigued by Kit's conversation with the little girl. They were more than content to listen to them talk. From the sounds of things, her family was extremely wealthy in their own right. Perhaps, that is why she was not swayed by his title or wealth.

"What is this?"

"That, my dear, is something that I do not want to see you touch. Okay? Promise me you will never touch it."

"Promise. But, why? What is it? Is it dangerous?"

"Yes. Very dangerous. I will hold you to your word; do not touch it."

"Right. Us women need to stick together. We canna be breaking promises."

"That's right. A lady, a true lady, never breaks her word. And, she is always polite to people, no matter what their station."

Mary nodded so solemnly Marcus and his men were hard pressed not to laugh; he saw it on their faces. The child was eating this up. They managed, just barely, to control their grins at a sharp glance from Kit.

The ride was nice. It relaxed all those who went, and they returned in high spirits. When the clanging came that announced the commencement of dinner, Kit remained with the servants and helped serve. She ignored Marcus, his parents and his friends, opting to serve the lower tables.

Marcus felt her slight and was not sure how to react. The first instinct he had was to demand she sit with him, but Marcus had come to know his little spitfire; that reaction from him would only push her farther away. His father gave him strange looks, as did his mother. Marcus wanted to yell at Kit to come sit with him but decided to let her do as she wished.

"Is your *friend* not going to join us for the meal?" his mother questioned between servings.

"I am not sure. Last time she was here, she was not exactly made to feel comfortable." He gave his mother a pointed look with that statement.

She had the grace to blush. "I am sorry about that. I am just worried about my son. I have every right to ask questions."

"Asking questions is one thing; what you did was wrong. You know it; there is no reason to pretend otherwise." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed her and entered a conversation with Duncan. From the corner of his eye, he watched his mother leave the table.

"I wish a word with you. Now would be good for me."

Kit turned at the voice, startled to see Marcus' mother there. Kit's upbringing dictated good manners to the other woman, even if that was the last thing she was inclined to do.

"Yes, ma'am." She set down her trays of food and spoke to

Clíodhna. Then, she turned her attention to the woman in front of her, wiped her hands on a rag and posed the question. “What is it you wish to discuss, ma’am?”

“Why aren’t you eating with us? My son says you are a guest, and yet, you are here with the servants. Why do you not eat with us?”

“My presence is welcome here. They are my friends, and as you so eloquently put yesterday, I look like a servant and, therefore, must belong with them. If you will excuse me, I have work to do.” With a nod, Kit turned and walked off.

The lady followed her and touched her on the shoulder. “Join us for dinner. It would mean a lot to my son.”

“Ma’am, thank you for the offer, but I should really stay here. There is a lot of work to be done, and if I stay, it will be done faster.”

“If I did not know better, I would think you are scared of my son. I believed you to be made of more than that.”

“I am not scared of him. I am just... Oh, very well. Let’s go.” With a couple words to some of the servants, she followed his mother out of the kitchens, not quite sure how she had been coerced into joining them for dinner. This woman was almost as good as her own mom with manipulation.

Marcus looked up to see his mother entering back into the hall, followed by a very subdued-looking Kit. Ready to defend her, he started to rise when his mother waved him back down to his chair.

Walking up beside him, his mother stopped and pulled Kit forward and said, “Here is your dinner companion. She just got busy in the kitchens and forgot to come eat with you.” She sat Kit in the chair next to Marcus and then sat next to her husband.

Sneaking glances at the woman next to him, Marcus was stunned to see the befuddled expression on her face. He offered her some choice cuts from his platter, and she took them without argument. She did not offer any resistance to any drink, either. Something foul was going on; this was not his fierce one.

“I am glad you came to eat with me.”

“Uh huh.” What a noncommittal response.

“What did my mother say to you? Did she upset you?” Marcus felt his anger rise at the thought of someone upsetting his Kit. His.

“Uh uh.” A negative shake of the head.

“Will you talk to me? I know something is bothering you; let me

help you. Together, we can make it better. Or just think of something happy. Like us together in bed.” Marcus was whispering in her ear, so no one could overhear what was being said between them.

“I have nothing of import to say.”

“Remember how it felt to have my hands caressing your body? How you trembled? Begged me to let you find release? I do. Want to know what I am thinking about for later?”

Narrowing her eyes in silent challenge, she gave him a grin that warned him of what was to come.

“I am sure that you have something thought of for later. I, nonetheless, am not interested,” she stated.

“I think I will change your mind. I will have you begging for release before the night is over.”

Kit leaned over to pick up a piece of meat and fed it to him as if she were the lady of the castle, all the while whispering in his ear, “I am, however, thinking of you sliding in and out of my wetness. Filling me full and making me squirm.” She flicked her tongue over his ear in a featherlight caress before she leaned back. Then, she calmly joined a conversation with Hugh and another knight.

Marcus got an instant erection at her words. His swollen member strained at his hose. Trying to calm down his body’s reaction, he speared another piece of meat for her. Shaking her head, she declined. After a few moments, Kit picked up a piece of meat, put it in her lush mouth and slowly pulled her fingers. He was mesmerized. Watched as her lips caressed and sucked on them. His gaze burned into her. He gulped. She ignored him.

Marcus reached for his drink as her throaty voice reached out to stroke him.

“Too bad it was just my fingers. I was kinda hoping it would have been something bigger and much more enticing for me to suck on.”

She took a drink and drew her lower lip in her mouth as she got the last drop off her enchanting mouth. She moaned low so only he could hear as she set the mug back down. To everyone else around, she was the calm and collected woman they had come to know and respect.

Hands in her lap, she turned her attention to Hugh. Marcus couldn’t believe it. He was as hard as stone, and she just sat there like nothing was wrong. Ignoring him and paying attention to

someone else. Just when he was determined to get her attention, she touched him. The immovable knight was as randy as a goat.

He shuddered. Her nails raked up and down his ever increasing hardness. To look at her, one would never know what she was doing, for only her fingers were moving. Alternating between light and heavy touches, she kept him at a fevered pitch. Marcus had begun to sweat; his need for release was so great.

"Is everything all right, son? You looked a little flushed." His father's voice came to him.

Turning her head, those sultry eyes devouring him, Kit said, "Your father is right, you know; you do look flushed. Perhaps, you are coming down with something. You should drink something." The little witch, she knew exactly what the problem was.

"I am fine. Just a minor pain. I will be fine; I'm sure it will go away later." He shot her a look he knew she had no trouble interpreting. Not that anyone else did, either.

Her eyes grew dark with desire as she responded, "I hope so. I would hate for you to be in pain." She smiled. "Could I have another piece of meat? It's very tasty."

Damn, she was good. He knew he could do nothing to her since she wore pants and would keep her body away from his hands. He granted her wish for the food. She smiled her thanks.

Tucking her head closer to his, she said, "How I wish it was my breast you were sucking on instead of that meat. I'm aching for you. My insides are quivering at the thought of what you do to me. Your lips, tongue, fingers. And, of course, your thick, strong cock. Oh, to have you in me, now." Another low moan as she increased the pressure and speed of her fingers on him. "But"—back to the flat, emotionless voice—"you have company, and I have other things to do." Kit gave him one last squeeze, slid her chair back and left the table.

Marcus trembled. Never before had he been so close to humiliating himself in public. It took all of his will power not to take her, right then and there. He had been bested and knew it. He could not leave the table without revealing his aroused condition to everyone gathered. Again, not that it would be a surprise to anyone. He shivered, trying to get himself back under control. Marcus focused on the conversations around him.

He looked up and saw her at the entrance as she took some empty platters back to the kitchen. She met his gaze with her

heated one and ran her tongue over her full lips. Damn her, he was even harder for her, if that was possible. His blood pounded for her. Marcus met the knowing look that Hugh gave him and tried to scowl at him, but failed.

His gaze kept down until he was back under some semblance of control. He finished his meal. Well, that course. Dessert had not been served, yet. As soon as it was safe for him to stand, he rose and made his excuses. Everyone accepted them, although they all knew exactly where he was going and why.

Marcus strode into the kitchen and, with supreme focus, found her. She was across the room. He made his way to her side and yanked Kit into his arms. Kissed her thoroughly, possessively and ferociously before he tossed her over his shoulder. Long legs strode them out of the kitchens. He made his way to the stairs where all of his knights, vassals, and other castle members were watching with avid expressions.

They all knew what was going on and gave whistles and jeers to encourage him. Bowing to them all, he smacked Kit on her perfectly rounded derriere and said, "Good night, men. Mother." Then, he took the stairs two at a time as the raucous laughter followed them both. He had finally staked his claim, and the whole castle knew it.

Kicking the heavy door to his chamber open, he stared at his page and said, "Out." The boy ran from the room, not quite able to hide the smirk on his face. Dumping Kit unceremoniously on the bed, Marcus glared at her.

"Woman. Do you know what you did to me down there?" he snarled as his eyes roamed over her with hunger.

Trying unsuccessfully to smother her laughter, she answered, "I think I felt some of what I did." When he advanced menacingly toward her, she held up her hands in surrender. "I think you know that you brought it on yourself. You started it. I can't help it that I play the game better than you do."

"Game. You want to play a game? We shall see who begs for quarter, first." He dove on to the bed and covered her with kisses. Before long, the kisses changed, and the only noises in the room were ones of satisfaction.

By the time they fell to exhaustion, there was no way of knowing who won the game. In a way, both won and both lost. But, since the hunger for each other was finally sated, all they wanted was rest.

They were lying together in a deep slumber. Marcus curled around her; his legs had hers held captive while his arms circled her waist pinning her to him. For anyone who could see them, it was a view of contentment.

They stayed in bed the whole day. Food was brought up to them, and they ate in the room. They made love in many different ways, sometimes gently, sometimes with a fierceness that surprised him in ways he didn't want to think about. Together, they expressed what they couldn't find the words to say.

Both were sleeping deeply, and neither moved when his page came in to light the morning fire. The page could see his lord's tan arms along his lady's bronze body, holding her as if he would never let her go. Leaving as quietly as he entered, he left to inform Hugh and Duncan that they were still asleep.

Chapter Fourteen

*The loss of love is a terrible thing; They lie who say
death is worse.*

~Cullen

Kit woke before Marcus. She rolled in his arms so she lay facing him. Staring at him, she etched him into memory. His chiseled features, long lashes, and the way the shadow of his morning beard looked. The way his chest moved with each breath he took. Her eyes memorizing him, she realized what had been missing from his look when she first met him. The gentleness was now apparent to her and to everyone else.

She ran her hands through his chest hair and skimmed her nails over his skin. His cock began to stir against her leg. Ignoring it for the moment, Kit moved her hands up to his face. The need to touch him overwhelmed anything else. Hand along his strong jawline, she ran it up to his hair, reveling in the contrasting feel of their skin types, his roughened by hair and winds versus her soft skin pampered by modern technology. Kit closed her eyes to commit every feature, every detail to memory. When she opened them, she stared into his intense green eyes.

“Morning, sweetheart.” He moved in to kiss her. Pulling back a little, he asked, “What is the matter? Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine, here with you.” She buried her face into his chest and inhaled his scent.

“What a perfect way to wake. There is just something else that I would like.” He bucked his hips against her, and she groaned. Soon, she forgot to be sad as he took her to the high plains of bliss. There was, however, a certain tenderness in him that she felt to be different from before.

When they joined the rest of the castle for the breaking of the fast, there were plenty of looks sent their way. They took it all in stride.

He stood beside her at the table. “I’ve decided we should go hunting. Gavin, ready the horses, hounds, and falcons. Have you ever been?” he asked her.

“No, never.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m looking forward to it, though.”

As they partook in the day, she grew continually bothered by

the looks she kept getting from the jackass Roger. Kit tried to avoid him, but he kept showing up wherever she went in the group. It was almost a challenge from him to her. As if Roger wanted to see what she would do.

If Marcus noticed, he gave no indication. He was immensely enjoying the hunt. He rode with his friends as they laughed and joked.

Riding slower and slower, Kit finally dropped back away from the hunting party. Dismounting, she walked Ares, for a while. It was time for her to go home. Somehow, she just knew that but had no way of understanding how to come about it. Searching her memory for the day she came to this place, she remembered nothing more than the fog. Looking up, she offered a quick prayer to help find her way.

Something was amiss. Not being able to place it, Marcus scanned the small hunting party. His parents and friends were all accounted for. Kit was not. She was not even within eyesight. Swallowing his fear, he wheeled his horse around and headed back the way they had came.

“What goes on, my friend?”

Hugh rode beside him. “I do not see Kit. I go to look for her.”

“Care for some assistance?”

“Thank you, but no, Hugh. Stay with the party. I shall find her and return.” Marcus spurred his horse and rode off.

Crashing through the underbrush, not caring how much noise he made, Marcus did not call out her name. If someone had her, he did not want them to know that he knew her. Bursting into a clearing, he saw a sight that struck him dumb. Kit was down on one knee, partially sheltered by the large body of Ares. That strange piece of wood from her saddle was pressed up to her shoulder, and it was aimed at him.

After a few seconds, she lowered it, stood, and slid it back into the scabbard on Ares’ saddle. “What are you doing here?”

“I was worried about you. I couldn’t find you. Where did you go?” His voice quivered with unshed anger and fear.

“I just needed some time to myself. I’m fine. Go back to the group.”

“You need protection. You could get injured out here.”

She gave a short bark of laughter. “Trust me, I’m fine. I have everything here needed to ensure my safety.” He slanted her a look,

and she changed her statement. "I'm well protected here. I have Ares and my rifle."

"Rifle. What, that thin thing that you had up to your shoulder? That would not protect you against a sword. Do not be foolish, woman."

"Believe me, it would. I know that for a fact. Just drop it. I mean, leave it alone. I'm fine. I will go back to the group if it will make you feel better."

Surprised by her easily attained agreement, he said nothing, just watched as she swung gracefully aboard her stallion. With barely a touch of the reins, she urged him on out of the clearing and back toward the group. Marcus followed, bothered by her distressed look.

Kit stayed behind the main group once they rejoined, riding beside some of the servants, quiet and brooding. Her brain ran wild with thoughts and concerns. Duncan swung his horse about and rode back to her.

"A word, milady?"

She lifted a brow but nodded. "Sure. Just don't call me that. Call me Kit or Katrina. I am not your lady nor anyone else's."

"Ride with me for a bit." It was between a request and a command. *More of a command.* It seemed that all these men knew how to do was issue orders. They were very good at it.

Nodding her assent, she maneuvered Ares to follow him. They rode away from those on foot, and soon, it was just the two of them alone. After a bit she asked, "What do you want, Baron?"

"Baron? What happened to Duncan? Why so formal? I thought we were friends. Please, Duncan or Wolf. I answer to both."

"Very well, *Wolf*, what is so important that you are riding with me?"

"Like I said, I thought we were friends. I thought you would like some company. Did I misunderstand?" His voice was curt.

Realizing how rude she had been gave her pause. "I'm sorry. I would like your company. I just have a lot on my mind, right now."

"What is going on between you and Sir Roger?"

Stunned by his question, Kit gaped at him in astonishment.

"What? Why would you say that? There is nothing, I mean *nothing*, between us except hate and animosity."

"I see the way he looks at you. Does Marcus know? I won't stand for you to hurt my friend."

She prayed for patience and swore when it failed. Gripping the reins, she took a deep breath. "Hellfire and damnation! I do everything in my power to stay away from him, and you think that there is something between us. I hate him; he makes my skin crawl. He is a disgusting lecher of a man. If you want the truth, I think that he was behind the attempt on my life. He has a thing for Clarissa and would do anything for her."

Ares, sensing her discomfort, sidestepped, and she brought him back under control without much handling of the reins.

"That *thing* takes pleasure in sending lewd looks and statements in my direction. He has told me so many times and put it so eloquently that Marcus would take his side in anything that I could say against him. He says I am naught but a whore for Marcus' pleasure, and he wishes to try me out. Like I was a freakin' car, he acts like he wants to test drive me."

Duncan raised his eyebrows.

She waved a hand. "Never mind. It's from my time. Look, the man is lower than a snake, in my opinion. I would be content to never lay eyes on him, again, but Marcus trusts him. It is not my place to say anything, just because he is an ill-mannered pig." Shaking her head, Kit looked Duncan straight in the eye as she inhaled deeply in a futile attempt to calm down. "There is not now, nor will there ever be, anything between myself and Roger. I swear on my life."

Duncan frowned "I believe you. Let's talk about something else. Tell me about your horse. Might I take a closer look at him when we get back?"

"You can look at him, now. I'm not in any rush to get back. I'm going to get off, for a while." She dismounted, and he followed suit. Duncan tied his horse to a tree branch and walked over to her and Ares.

"Is he dangerous?"

"Not unless you wish to hurt me." She laid her hand upon Ares' neck. "No, he's not. He's one of the most gentle creatures I have ever known." Her hands lingered lovingly on the glossy hide of her stallion.

Duncan placed his hands on him and ran them over the horse with an experienced hand. Kit stood back and watched as Duncan continued his appraisal of her horse. As he ran his hands down the legs, Ares picked up each foot when he got there. "He's amazing.

Would you consider selling him?"

"Not on your life. You can ride him if you wish to try his gaits." There was not a force on this earth that would make her give up her horse.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Be my guest. Just let me adjust the stirrups."

Duncan swung up on the horse. He picked up the reins, and she said, "He has a very gentle mouth. Use your legs, and he will respond better."

She patted Ares and whispered something in his ear. "He also knows voice commands." She stepped back. He nudged him into a walk and the horse went smoothly and willingly.

Kit walked over to Duncan's horse and grabbed the mane and swung up. His horse snorted and sidestepped, a few times, until she made it clear to the animal she was not getting off. And, he wasn't going to be able to get her off. Leaning over, she untied him from the branch and set out after Duncan. Catching up with Duncan, she gave him a grin as she saw the awe he felt riding her horse.

"Amazing animal."

"I know. Thanks, though."

They rode together in companionable silence back to the castle. As they came in through the gate, many, if not all, eyes were on them. Marcus nodded his greetings to the lagging two members of the party.

After the horses were put away, Kit headed to her room then down to the kitchens. She found Mary and some other children there, waiting for a story. She took them to the solar and sat by the roaring fire to ward off the chill. Settling down on a pile of furs with them, she told the story of Ali Babba and the Forty Thieves, when she was done she told the story of Zeus and Lamia.

By the time she finished the second, the solar was filled with people who listened to her weave the tales. There were looks of speculation and doubt, but no matter how they viewed the story, they were caught up in the legend, just the same as the kids. Marcus stood near his parents, as Hugh and Duncan were closer to her as they also listened with rapt attention.

A servant came in and got Marcus. The expression on his face when he returned worried her, but she held her questions. Hugh and Duncan got up and went to him. After some brief whispering, Marcus interrupted her discussion with the children. "There are

some traveling merchants out in the courtyard with some different wares, if you would like to go.”

Intrigued, Kit stood. Promising those gathered another tale later, she accompanied Marcus out to see the merchants. The carts were full of silks, spices, furs, trinkets and many different things. All in all, it was not something that Kit would have pictured when she thought about medieval times. Kit watched as the women of the castle got small things while she merely looked over the whole lot.

A tall gentleman with light blond hair approached her as she was perusing the carts. He was a Nordic giant. *Oh, hell.* He was beautiful. He was as tall as Marcus with a similar build. Up close, she noticed his deep chocolate eyes. *I thought he would have had blue.* He had a sword on his back with sapphires in the hilt and carried himself like he knew how to use it. *There's no way I'll ever get used to the raw savagery of this time—everyone ready to kill someone else. Although, it's not so different, I guess.*

The flaxen-haired man bowed low over her hand, bringing it to his lips, and pressed a kiss on her knuckles. It sent shivers through her body. *Okay, I wasn't expecting that.* Arching a brow in response, Kit waited to see what was next. He winked.

A shadow fell over them, and Marcus appeared, his expression thunderous as he pulled her hand away from the visitor's touch.

“My lady. Beautiful lady.” Another bow and the large man left their presence without so much as a nod to Marcus.

“Wow!” Kit's voice was slightly breathless. One head over her heart. *There was just something very erotic about a man that bends over your hand for a kiss while there is a huge sword strapped to his back. His accent sounds Slavic, but I can't be sure.*

“What are you doing letting him kiss your hand?” Marcus snarled.

“He was just saying hello. Why, are you jealous?”

“Damn right I am; I want no one to touch you but me.” He placed his arm around her waist as he growled this in her ear.

“Don't be silly. There is nothing to get mad about. Now, I am going to go look at some more things.” Patting his arm, as one would soothe a child, Kit moved away from him. He followed.

“Not without me.”

“Really, Marcus. I'm perfectly capable of looking at things on my own. I'm sure you have somewhere else to be.”

“Not with that blond fool around you I don't.”

“What are you worried about? We are in your courtyard. Not only that, but it is full of people. *Your* people. You are making a scene. Behave yourself.” She walked off, shaking her head, and yet, felt strangely warm at the thought of his jealousy.

The “blond giant”, as she dubbed him, appeared, again. He offered her silks and scented soaps. Declining them all with a smile, she moved on, yet he followed her as her perusal of the carts continued. Kit finally turned toward him, “Is there something I can do for you? Why are you following me?”

“Beautiful lady, hello.” He reached for her face, but she eluded him. It was one thing to have a man bend over your hand for a kiss. It was something else entirely to have them reach for your face.

“What is your game? Do you speak any more English than what you were saying?” Instantly, she viewed him in a competition view. Could she defend herself against him? What would be his strengths and weaknesses?

He rattled off in a language that seemed vaguely familiar to her. Russian. He was speaking Russian. When she answered him in the same language, his whole face lit up. He smiled and looked devastatingly handsome when he did so, making her heart skip a beat. Well, a few beats. The blond picked her up and swung her around. When she had her feet on the ground, once again, she saw Marcus scowling and coming over, the expression on his face was none other than fierce possession. That and murder.

“Get your hands off her, you—”

“Wait, Marcus. He does not speak much English. He was just excited to find someone who spoke his language, since the people he’s been traveling with don’t speak it, either.”

“What the hell does he speak?”

“Russian. He is a long way from home. His name is Nikolas.” Kit focused back on the large man, speaking quickly. After he answered, Kit took his arm and walked off.

It turned out that he was looking for Marcus’ father, Gerald. Kit played translator and delivered the message. Nikolas had been traveling to find him as a last wish from his mother. Long ago, his mother had been captured by the Normans and made a slave. Gerald, at the time, having just earned his spurs, used her to do his celebrating with. They stayed together for about two weeks. When he left, Gerald snuck her out and found a way for her to get back to her home on board a caravan.

He never saw her, again. This man was Marcus' half-brother. The slave girl had been pregnant when she'd left. Before she died, she'd made her son promise to go and find Gerald, just so he knew he had a son. No, he did not want anything, just to deliver the message and find his way back home. He had been gone for over a year and wished to return.

Gerald's shock was obvious at the news. Jocelyn took the news with amazing calm. She did excuse herself and head to her room, but she kept her cool.

Kit could tell Marcus did not want to believe it, at all.

She continued to translate for the father-and-son reunion. Suddenly, in the middle of it, Nikolas looked at her and asked her name. As she told him, she felt a quiver deep inside her as he rolled it off his tongue. He and Marcus had to be related; both of them fairly oozed sensuality. If Gerald had been like this when he was younger, it was no wonder he had another son. She endured Nikolas' flirting since she knew it was harmless. Marcus did not appear to believe it was.

Soon, Kit made her excuses, stood and left father and son to find a way to communicate. Nikolas did speak a little English, after all, and they needed to speak among themselves. On her way out of the room, she stopped by Marcus, smiled down at him and winked. *I probably shouldn't get as much pleasure as I do by shocking this man, but I can't help it.*

Safely hidden away in her room, Kit contemplated her choices. She really needed to find a way to get home. Body shaking with a sudden bout of nausea at the idea of leaving Marcus, she barely made it to the garderobe in time. After she cleaned up, she went and lay on the bed where she fell asleep rather quickly.

αβ

After the evening wore down and his people had all retired to their beds, Marcus cracked open the adjoining door between his and Kit's rooms. She slept like an angel. The only light in the room was the glow coming off the embers. Covered in furs, she did not even stir as he undressed and slid in beside her.

He loved the way her body instinctively sought his warmth and draped on top of his. Curving his arms around her, Marcus held her and settled down to sleep. Kit began to moan in her sleep, sounds which made his body hard and ready to please her and make him be the sole reason for the moans. However, when she began to flail

her arms, Marcus just tugged her in closer, tamping down his ache to sheath himself inside her warm velvety depths, and mumbled loving words to her. She eventually calmed and, if possible, pressed closer to him.

He woke her the following morning slowly with kisses and touches.

“That’s it, my fierce one. Give it to me. Come for me. That’s it. Let it go; I want it all. Everything you have, come for me.”

The words coupled with his actions of tongue and fingers pushed her over the edge. She barely retained the cry as it left her lips, as her hips arched upward.

“That was a most delicious way to wake up. I am glad it wasn’t a dream.” Her voice, sleep roughened, skated over his skin like a wagon of pleasure.

Storm gray eyes rolled back as he entered into her totally, sliding easily into her wetness. The rhythm was slow to start with, but as she worked her inner muscles, he started to move with greater energy; he couldn’t help it.

Her hips rose to meet his relentless thrusts as fingers that scratched his back and shoulders only served to add more fuel to the fire pooling deep within him. The creaking of bed ropes was hardly audible over their pants and low groans.

The next week passed without trouble. Outwardly, Marcus did nothing but made sure that Roger was more carefully watched. Finally, the day arrived that his parents were to leave. They had to get back to their own holdings before the weather turned foul. Marcus was grateful. He wanted to be alone with Kit, and perhaps, they would take his half-brother with. He wasn’t fond of how Nikolas watched Kit.

αβ

Clíodhna was missing. Kit checked all over the grounds, the village, yet still couldn’t find her. Her concern increasing, she questioned the servants if they had seen her, and at their negative responses, Kit went in search of Marcus.

She found him in the solar. “Have you seen Clíodhna this morn?” Her question was serious, even while her gaze happily took in his physique. Even though she got to have him with her at night, she still took each opportunity to memorize him, wanting him never forgotten in her mind.

“Nay. For what reason do you ask?” He caressed her face. His

eyes set her aflame. And his touch, even something so simple, was like he'd put a torch to her and was watching her burn. From the inside out.

"I had something to tell her, but I cannot find her, at all. She's not in the kitchens, and none of the servants have seen her."

"I'm sure she will show up." Marcus stole a brief kiss before leaving her alone.

Her uneasiness mounted as she did another quick search. Nothing. Her unease never faded; in fact, it grew stronger as the hours passed. The overall feel of the day was wrong, and unable to shake the shivers that ran up her spine, Kit did a few more searches.

Because the servant girl hadn't shown up by the midday meal, it was just about enough to put Kit over the edge. The ominous feel of the day had become too much. "Marcus, something is wrong. I can feel it."

"You are just nervous. Nothing is wrong."

A shout from the gate brought everyone's attention. There was a horseman approaching fast, dragging something behind him. Extra guards took their positions along the walls and waited. Marcus and Kit joined them. The rider had no markings on him to identify who he was.

The horse was not one that they knew, either. Stopping just out of range of the archers the horseman yelled in a deep scratchy voice, "Baron. Lord Quinn. This is for you. A warning. Get rid of the interloper or more of this is going to come." He threw down the rope and spurred his horse away.

Kit chewed on her thumbnail as Marcus sent two men out immediately to discover what had been left. When the men returned, they were very somber. It was a person who had been dragged behind. But, not just anyone—it was Cliodhna. She had been beaten almost beyond recognition.

Kit shouldered herself into the circle surrounding the girl. "Cliodhna. What happened? Who did this to you?" Tears ran down her face as she spoke to the battered girl. Sinking beside her, Kit gathered the beaten body in her arms and gently stroked Cliodhna's face. There wasn't any way she was going to make it; Kit knew this as sure as she took her own breath. If they were in Kit's time, perhaps, but now? It wasn't going to happen.

"I am sorry, mistress. I tried to protect her. You must save her, please. I promised her that you would come for her." The words

came haltingly as it was increasingly harder and harder for Cliodhna to breathe.

“Who? Save who?” Kit forgot the others around her and the demands they gave for a translation.

With the last bit of breath, Cliodhna rattled, “*Cailin beag. A Mháire.*” Her moss green eyes closed forever as she was finally removed from her pain.

Kit held the young woman to her breast and cried, saying a quiet prayer over her body. Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, what Cliodhna said hit her. Jumping up, the body falling to the side, Kit speared one of the servants with her gaze. “You take care of her. Get her ready to be buried. Now! Get moving,” she yelled when the man did not move fast enough for her. She turned and ran inside the castle, Marcus and others hot on her heels.

“Kit. Kit! What did she say?” Marcus yelled as he thundered up the stairs after her. He burst into her room as she stood shoving her duster full of rifle shells. *Some fucker just went to far.*

Kit knew her expression overflowed with fury. “She did not tell me who did it, but they have Mary.” She shoved past him and the others as she headed back down the stairs.

“Mary?”

Behind her, Marcus hollered orders, and the entire place erupted in activity.

Horses were readied as the three legendary knights prepared to ride, again. They were strapping on chainmail and getting weapons ready. Marcus’ half-brother offered to go and was getting readied by another squire. Kit witnessed the action then made her way to the kitchen.

Kit took some food for the ride. Grasping the hands of the little girl’s mother, she said, “I promise you, I’ll bring her back.” A gentle squeeze. “I swear it.”

Back in the main part of the castle, pages and squires ran everywhere. There was such a flurry of activity, she was momentarily distracted from her quest. She looked and saw the men getting ready to mount. Hurrying to the stable, she spoke low to Ares as she saddled him. Reading correctly the tension in the air, he was snorting and pawing the straw.

As she rode out of the stable, she checked to ensure her rifle was loaded then slammed it back into the scabbard. Doing a mental check, she made sure that she had all she needed. She joined the

men.

Marcus ran an impersonal gaze over her. "You are staying." His tone was emotionless. She got it—he was in his warrior mode.

Tough shit. So was she.

"Not on your life. I'm going. It's my fault she was taken, anyway. I can keep up and won't get in the way."

"See that you don't." He spoke with cold, heartless words. "Someone has dared to breach my walls and hurt one of my people."

The gates opened, and thunder echoed in the air as the men and their horses pounded over the ground, pursuing after the man who had delivered the assaulted young woman. The pace was grueling. Kit didn't mind; she was busy concentrating on how she was going to get Mary back. Her guilt gnawed at her gut. It was her fault. If she hadn't stayed, then Cliodhna would still be alive and Mary wouldn't have been abducted. Had Kit paid more attention to everything other than the man she shared her nights with, she may have noticed earlier they had been taken, and perhaps, then, she could have saved them.

They rode until it was too dark to follow the tracks, anymore. As the camp was set up for the night, she tended Ares and made sure he was taken care of.

Chapter Fifteen

Eat with the rich, but go to play with the poor, who are capable of joy.

-Logan Smith

Partaking in his meager dinner, Marcus felt his blood roaring inside him. He was a warrior, a knight. This was the life he was used to. What he lived for. The men were outlining the day tomorrow, but he paid little attention. He was focused on the woman who stayed away from the fire. That cooled the rage in his blood. Maybe this life was not what he needed, anymore. Maybe what he needed was to settle down with Kit.

There was a coldness about her he did not like. Surrounding her and giving her an edge he'd not seen around her before. Not even when those men had attacked her had this been her look. While he understood she believed herself responsible for what happened—everyone heard what that man had proclaimed—this aura about her rubbed him the wrong way. Rising, he went to her and enfolded her in his arms.

Accepting his embrace, Kit stood in the protective circle of his arms. Her soft scent had tinges of horse and sweat in it. Soothing him.

“We will get the ones who did this.”

“Yes, I will.”

She will? He almost corrected her statement but decided not to. “Come sleep with me. I have need to hold you tonight.”

Kit allowed him to lead her to the bed that had been laid down out of sight of the others. None of the men said anything as they saw her going off with Marcus. He made love to her that night with an intensity that scared him in ways he never believed would ever afflict him.

They woke early, and as soon as the light came, they were off riding hard. They came to a steep incline. It was mostly loose rock, not at all safe. However, it seemed to be the only way to get to the man they were tracking. They had to go up to continue on. In front of them was a river that would lead around the incline. That alone would add almost another day on the journey, but it would be safe. “Halt!”

The men stopped, and soon, Gavin struggled slowly up the slant. At the top, he paused to pick something up. He ran a little farther

and disappeared from view.

Time that seemed like hours passed then the squire reappeared. He half-slid, half-stumbled down the embankment. "My lord. I found this. I also saw a horse running down there." He panted, pointing back over the cliff.

"Good work, Gavin." Reaching out his hand, Marcus took some fabric. After looking at it, he handed it to Duncan, who examined it closely.

"My lord, there were tracks up there. I think that is where he dragged her down. There is a way to get down to where I saw a horse here, but it will take a while. I believe he traveled the night to get ahead of us." Gavin fought to regain his breath.

"Is there no quick way down?"

"No safe one. It is almost a pure drop. There is no path down. We will have to go straight across the river here and then around and down."

"Ride." Marcus did not wait to see if everyone followed him as he led the way.

Kit stopped Gavin as ideas raced through her mind. *It would cut off so much time if we could go over instead of around.* "Is there a way down from at the top of that ridge?"

"Not one fit for people."

"I see." She trembled with anger. *I'm not a knighted horse loaded down with armor. Ares is mountain raised, and I'm not that heavy.*

"If one had a horse capable of doing it, I am not sure they would come out in front of the rider, but they would be much closer than we are now. My guess is that any horse would have a hard time getting up this, especially with the armor they are carrying. Plus its rider. He must have deliberately gone up there just to drag her down the rocky side. *I almost did not make it. Come along, milady. Milord will catch him. We should go, now.*"

Kit had removed her duster as she listened to Gavin speak. Him speaking the words she'd been thinking helped solidify her decision. She secured the trench coat behind her and went with Gavin.

The group was almost completely across the river when they trailed after them. Marcus looked back, and she met his gaze without flinching. Nor did she give him a smile. True to her word, she wasn't slowing them down or voicing any complaints. He faced away and urged Marauder on faster, and the others picked up the speed.

Halfway through the river, Kit slowed Ares and looked at the rocky climb behind her. Instantly, her decision was made for her. Wheeling Ares around, she kneed him on, and they tore off toward the crest.

Leaning in low on his neck, she urged him on. She believed, without doubt, he could make it up there. He was a mountain horse, after all. Their other advantage was they also didn't wear the armor the others did. Beneath her, Kit felt his muscles bunch for the scramble up. She moved with him as he made his way up the side of the cliff, snorting and blowing the whole way, as his powerful body worked. At the top, she gazed about.

Gauging the best place to go down, she just decided on the edge. Ares spun on his hind legs, his unspoken challenge blatant. Kit sent him forward as soon as his hooves touched the ground.

Kit felt Ares gather himself for the jump. She hoped beyond hope he still had enough of the mountains left in him. *A little late to be second guessing myself here.* He launched himself off, and she leaned back. Staying as far back in the saddle as she could, she held herself almost parallel with his body as he shot down the side. Branches smacked her in the face, and she felt like a blasted martini James Bond would drink—shaken not stirred.

Her doubts were unfounded for Ares knew what he was doing. He handled himself like he did it every day. By the time they reached the bottom, she was bleeding from her head and he was tired. She didn't give him time to rest, but patted him and praised him as she urged him on.

Marcus had looked behind him at Gavin's shout. He halted, which everyone else did, as well. He glanced back across the river, and his heart leapt out of his chest. Kit was riding her horse up the side of the cliff, like it was nothing.

"She is going to kill herself," Duncan murmured.

Marcus' throat was dry as he watched her ascend to the top. Ares was blowing hard, but she kept him moving. She urged him into a run along the top.

"What in the hell is she doing?" one of his knights wondered. All of the men were frozen solid as they watched her. "She is not slowing down. My god, she is going to go over."

Marcus could no more stop the cry that burst from his lips than he could stop his heart from beating its next. He sat there on Marauder as she went over the cliff.

As soon as she disappeared from view, Marcus urged Marauder on at a run. He felt the need to get to the bottom of that cliff and find her. The others followed him without a word. They rode hard and covered the ground faster than they would have expected to.

At nightfall, he still pressed on until Hugh came to him and told him to stop, if only for his horse's sake. For the first time in his adult life, Marcus felt like crying himself to sleep. Her loss hit him deeper than he would ever care to admit. At the same time, he was ready to strangle her for doing something so stupid and dangerous. He never should have allowed her to come with.

He allowed minimal rest time, mainly for the horses, his men could sleep in the saddle if necessary. They were on the move after that. He pressed on, heedless of the dangers around him. It was light by the time he reached where her body should have been had she fallen. There was no sign of her, just hoof prints. A glimmer of hope sparked in him. Maybe, just maybe, she'd made it.

I'm not sure if I will take you over my knee or kiss you until the sun sets. Just stay alive until I find you, fierce one, just stay alive.

Chapter Sixteen

True love never grows old

-Anonymous

Kit rode hard until dark. Ares was on his last legs when she pulled him up by a stream. Quickly, she stripped his tack from him, walked, and cooled him down. When he was cool enough, she let him drink. While he drank and rolled in the grass, she opened one of her bags and pulled out some grain for him. He needed it.

She washed quickly in the water then resaddled Ares. Just in case. Ingesting a swift meal of some bread and a chunk of cheese, she kept her ears open for anything, at all. The darker it got, the colder she became, and she put her duster back on.

Ares snorted. She jumped up, wide-awake, and reached for the rifle. Not seeing anything close to her, yet wondering what made him nervous, she looped his reins over the saddle horn. Her horse gazed off into the distance, and when Kit stared, she caught the faint smell of smoke. Someone had a fire going.

Kit swung into the saddle and headed him in that direction. There was no moon, so she knew they would be virtually undetectable. Her leathers were black, as was her duster, and of course with Ares being as black as pitch, he would blend in. Moving forward like a ghost in the dark, they disturbed nothing.

Tense. She strained to hear or see anyone, at all. Finally, the glow from the fire entered her line of vision. There were about fifteen men sitting around its heat, drinking. They were a dirty, disgusting bunch, and she shivered with shame as she thought of the horrors Clíodhna had gone through at their hands. She shook with anger at the thought of Mary going through something similar.

Dismounting, Kit quietly made her way closer. Ares stayed as still as a statue; to see him, one would think he was made of stone. Somehow, he understood the importance of this moment. Kit crept until she was at the outskirts of their camp. She looked about anxiously for signs of Mary.

“How long does we stays here?” one grumbled.

“Until the boss says so. Just shut up; you complain more than the girl.”

“Are you sure we is safe out here? Mayhap we should ride on.”

“I know that they will be at least two days back unless they can

find a way to scale those hills there. I about killed my horse going up there to finish off the little whore. Worth it, though, to be able to drag her back to them. Wish I could have seen his face when he found out who it was. None of his men looked pleased with the message I delivered.” Chuckles from all around.

“Are you sure they don’t be knowing who you is?”

“Aye, my voice was changed. Besides, I am one of his knights. Why would he suspect me? I am not even supposed to be there, right now. I was sent off on something else when I got the message from the boss to take care of this.”

“I just don’t be wanting the baron to get me. I heard what he was called during those battles. The Devil. He is one of the king’s finest knights. I have seen him on the battlefield, and he is unstoppable.”

“I am a knight. I can kill also. Just ‘cause the king did not pile me with treasure don’t mean I am any less a warrior.” The venom in his voice reached even Kit, who saw the men around him draw back a little and try to calm him down. They offered him more drink, which he took readily.

“I am not scared of Baron Marcus Quinn. I will take the girl to prove it.”

Take the girl. What the hell was he talking about? Where was she?

One of the men stumbled over to another tree and came back dragging Mary with him. Kit’s heart pounded. Mary looked scared, but for now, she seemed to be physically unharmed.

Mary cried silently. The men only ignored her. The knight who hated Marcus so much stood. He drew off his cape, and Kit’s breath caught in her throat. It was one of Roger’s friends. One who never went far without Roger.

As he reached for the girl, another voice broke through the camp. “Get away from her, you idiot.”

“But, I was just going to have some fun.”

“I know exactly what kind of fun you were going to have, and I said no.” The man swept into the firelight, yet was still concealed by his hood and cloak.

“We will leave by morning light. If I know the baron, he is hot on our heels. Especially, since you delivered the message about his Nubian whore.”

His voice sent chills up her back. At once, Kit knew who it was.

There was only one man who called her that. Roger.

Momentarily distracted by drink, the men forgot about the scared little girl. Kit scanned the camp, looking for some kind of way to get Mary and get away without them knowing. Damn. She wished she knew what to do.

The men were drinking more and more. Roger did not say a word, even though it was easy to tell that he did not agree with them. He sat a ways from them and alone. Finally, the men began to fall asleep. When the camp was quiet, she made her way back to Ares and rode back with him.

Some snored, and some slept like the dead. Mary had been taken away, and Kit saw her next to Roger. The only one who had not drunk much. Hell's bells. What was she to do, now?

The night stretched on, and Roger roused the men about an hour or so before dawn. He kicked them and shouted at them to get them up. They drank their breakfast. Two fights broke out among the men as Roger slipped away. The man who had spoken about Mary last night was the one who went with her to take care of her needs. He was pulling her back into the circle when she stumbled. She cried out and tried to break her fall.

Yanking her by her hair, now dirty and snarled, he pulled her up. "Stand up." The men all laughed at her, and she cried even more. The creature holding her looked around, and when he did not see what his eyes were searching for, he got a look on his face that scared even Kit.

He tossed the girl down on the ground and ripped at her clothes. Mary screamed and cried as she tried to fight him off. He backhanded her, and blood spurted from her mouth. When his hands went to the ties of his leggings, Kit's brain finally accepted what she had hoped was not in the process of happening.

Fury erupted within her. Fury so intense it made the anger she had at the ones who were sent to kill her look like a summer's gentle breeze compared to the strength and lethality of a twister.

With several deep breaths to control her rage, lest it get out of control, Kit swiftly and silently double-checked to make sure her rifle was loaded and ready.

The men were definitely not calming down. They seemed to be getting pumped up and more rowdy by the actions of the man holding onto Mary. Kit's heart pounded. Never in her life had she had any desire to hurt people like she did now.

As the loathsome man lowered his breeches, the proof of his desire more than visible to Mary, Kit acted. Her rifle held on the man who was over Mary, she stepped into the camp. Ares was at her back, so she knew she was safe from any attempts to attack her from behind.

“Get away from her, you bastard,” Kit’s voice rang sharp and clear in the morning. The men reacted as quickly as they could.

Roger stood. Drawing his sword, he advanced with the rest of the men. “You have no way of hurting us, whore. What do you think you will do with that stick against our swords?”

“Back away from Mary or he will be the first to find out.” Her tone was as cold as winter’s frost. All the men stopped except for the man by Mary, he was too far-gone in his lust.

The man positioned himself over the crying little girl. Wrenching her legs apart, he got ready to commit the ultimate violation. A loud bark rang out in the morning. The rag-tag’s group of horses started at the sound and was prancing nervously. It didn’t matter what the time; if a horse had not been desensitized to a gun, they still got scared. All the men looked at the smoke coming from the “stick” Kit had up to her shoulder.

Roger scowled. “It is just something to try and scare us. Get her. There are many more of us than her.”

The men slowly moved upward, again, until they saw the little girl running around them and to Kit. As one, they turned their heads to look at the man who had been with her. He was lying flat on his back, and there was a big hole in his chest, his blood was spilling all over his body and soaking into the dirt on the ground.

One of the men ran to him and yelled, “He is dead. The whore killed him.”

Their hesitation obvious. They looked back at her; and she put her rifle back up to her shoulder.

“Get up on the horse, Mary.” Kit’s tense voice made an argument not even worth it.

“I can’t. He’s too big.” Her frightened voice cracked back to Kit.

Moving back so she was alongside of Ares, Kit told Mary to get between her and her horse. Never for one second did she take her eyes off the men. When she located Mary in her peripheral vision, she held the rifle in just her right hand. Using only her left, she grabbed Mary’s arm and tossed her unceremoniously up into the saddle. Good thing the child was so light.

The men decided to rush her, again. Two more shots rang out. Two more men fell, their blood greedily soaked up by the dirt. When the men were trying to figure out what was going on, she put three more cartridges into her rifle. "Are you on, Mary?"

"Uh huh."

"Make sure you hold on really tight to his mane, not the reins, but his mane. Don't let go no matter what happens. Okay? You have to promise me. Promise me, Mary. I need you to focus, right now. Concentrate on what I am saying."

"Promise." Her voice was so small and scared Kit almost looked at her to reassure her.

"That's my girl." She spoke a command to Ares, and he tore off running, carrying with him a scared girl who bounced on his back. The men quickly approached Kit.

"You can't get all of us. I will kill you first. You stupid whore." Roger's voice was full of anger. "Get her, men."

The men lunged forward as one. Tears threatened as she fired on the men. Kit tried for shoulder or leg wounds and not to kill. She quickly emptied her rifle, the shots cracking throughout the morning, sharp and deadly. Not one single thought was given to the fact that she may be changing history; all she knew was she and Mary needed to survive. *Were* going to survive. As the men tried to gain confidence on how to fight such a weapon, she turned and ran.

The men's horses had long since scattered with the noise from her rifle, so they ran after her on foot. She had the advantage of no drink in her system, jogging daily and doing martial arts. The men, on the other hand, were fueled by rage. The remaining ones were gaining on her as she let loose a whistle.

Her very large black horse sprang from the trees like an avenging spirit and pounded up past the men and toward his mistress. The one he would die to protect. Roger got off a swipe of his sword, and it lanced across Ares' haunches. Red blood intermixed with black hair. Ares never faltered. As her stallion came up alongside her, she grabbed his mane with one hand and yanked. It was difficult to reach across her body and pull upward, still holding the rifle in her other hand. Ares' momentum made the feat possible.

Her foot found the stirrup, and she managed to drag herself up into the saddle without knocking Mary off. She slammed the rifle home into its scabbard and reached for the reins. Sheltering Mary

with her body and arms, she urged Ares on.

A sharp pain tore through her lower back, followed by one closer to her shoulder. The pain was so intense she lurched to the side. Ares got his body back under hers when she wavered, and soon, they were away from the men. Their only reminder of them: one scared little girl and a woman with two arrows sticking out from her back.

Kit pushed them on as much as she could. When the pain in her back was too much, she told Ares to stop. She groggily realized that she was by where she had previously stopped at the stream. Stumbling down from her horse, Kit turned and helped Mary down.

“Honey, I need you to do something else. You need to walk him around in circles for a bit. Can you do that for me?”

A tentative nod of blonde curls came, and Kit’s heart shattered at the sight of Mary’s empty eyes. Mary put shaking hands out to take the reins and began to walk Ares around in a small circle. Kit crawled to the stream and drank greedily from the cool water, allowing it to refresh her the best it could. The pain hovered on the line of too much. Back on fire, and nausea churning relentlessly in her gut, she made her way back to the girl and the injured horse.

Taking the reins from Mary, she smiled at the child. “Go get yourself some water. Then, we’ll eat something.” Mary glanced at her with fear filling in her eyes. “Go ahead, honey. I’ll be right here. I have to see to his wound. It’ll be all right.” Kit kept her voice calm and as free of pain as possible. Black spots wavered before her eyes, and she struggled desperately not to pass out.

Mary went and quickly drank. “Your back. Will you be all right?”

Turning slowly, Kit answered, “I’ll be fine. Come, get some food. Eat slowly.” Her body bordered on numb. While Mary ate, Kit clumsily loaded the rifle once more and made sure Ares was fed and watered.

Kit reached back and busted off one of the arrow shafts, nearly passing out from the pain. She couldn’t quite reach the other one. “Mary, honey, you have to break this off. Can you do that for me?” Her voice slurred as more darkness swarmed her vision.

“It will hurt. I’m not strong enough, and I might hurt you.”

“No, honey, you won’t. I can barely feel it, at all. I need you to do that for me. Come on; you can do it.”

Kit grit her teeth against the pain and sat as still as stone as

Mary tried to snap the shaft. In the end, she had to help a little, but together, they managed to break it off. Mary got some water from the stream and bathed Kit's face and gave her some to drink. Then, she helped to take off Kit's heavy duster, which was just adding to the pain throbbing all the way through her back.

After a while, once Ares had rested, Kit realized it was time to go. The men would be coming on them soon. Getting to her feet slowly, she hobbled over to Ares. Looking down at Mary, she said, "I'll get up first then you can sit in my lap. This way his injury and mine won't be affected. Okay? I'm not leaving you. I'm just getting on first." Kit held Mary's gaze until she got an answering nod.

For the second time that day, Kit made a less than graceful mount of her horse. Swallowing back the bile, she took several deep breaths. She reached down for Mary. "Put your foot up on mine after you give me your hand. I just can't pull you up straight. Okay?"

"Aye. I understand." The little girl reached her hand up and did as she was asked. When she was settled on Kit's lap, Kit drew her duster over the young girl, for it would keep her warm despite the tears in her clothes.

"Go to sleep, little one. For now, we will just ride."

Mary did not want to close her eyes. She fought to stay awake, and while Kit understood, she sang in a low voice, and eventually, Mary drifted off.

Kit sang to help Mary go to sleep but also to try to keep her own mind off the pain. She was exhausted, and her adrenaline was starting to fade away.

By midafternoon, Kit also dozed in the saddle lulled by Ares' smooth jogtrot. Suddenly, he stopped. He nickered low and pawed the ground. Kit came fully awake instantly. She gently nudged Mary awake.

"Mary. Come on, honey, wake up." When Mary looked at her, Kit added, "You need to sit up now, honey. Someone is coming, and I need to have the use of both hands. Remember, hold only to his mane." That was a lie. She couldn't move her right arm if her life depended on it, and the sad thing was, it did. *I have to go through with this and not fail her.*

Unease furled in her gut as she looked at Mary, the change happened to Mary during her sleep, she became cold. She nodded and did as she was told with no words spoken. Kit noticed the

difference in her eyes; there was no emotion, at all. They were flat, expressionless. Regardless, that was not a problem Kit could address, at the time.

She heard the pounding of many hooves coming up the trail. She hoped that, from the direction they were coming, it was Marcus. But, with the muddled condition her mind was in, there was no way for her to be sure. Not willing to take any chances, Kit removed them from sight and hid them in the trees.

The horses poured into view. Lathered in sweat, they were driven on hard, relentlessly. She recognized Marauder at the front of the thundering herd. Nudging Ares, she placed him on the path in front of them.

Chapter Seventeen

She who has never loved has never lived

~Gay

Marcus could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the black horse step from the trees and stop on the path. He had dismounted before his horse had even come to a complete stop. Running toward Kit, he stopped when that damn horse of hers, Ares, reared up and struck out at him with lethal front hooves.

Ares was brought under control quickly, and Marcus got to see the haunted face of a dirty, scared little girl, and the sweat streaked one of the woman he loved more than life itself. Kit slid off Ares, slowly. She gently helped Mary, who took a stance of protection in front of her.

Her movements are stiff and as if she was injured. I have to know what happened.

All of the men started talking at once. Marcus held up his hand for silence, and it fell immediately. He looked at the females in front of him, wanting nothing more than to take one in his arms and hold her. The looks on their faces told him it would not be welcomed, right now.

Kit gave a brief version of the story. After she was done, she asked Gavin, her words slightly slurred, "Gavin, can you see to Ares? He needs a wound looked after."

When he headed for the horse, Mary blocked his way. Marcus frowned as he noted her eyes, which used to be so full of life, were now cold and wary.

Gavin knelt down in front of her and said, "I will not hurt him, Mary. I just need to take care of the wound he has." He gave her a smile and held out his hand. She didn't bat an eye. She just took the reins and led them away. Gavin followed.

With Mary gone, Marcus turned his attention back to Kit, and she continued her tale, this time, giving a lot more detail. Marcus felt the rage grow inside him. Roger. The man would die.

"How many were there?" His voice not betraying his emotions to anyone. At the same time, those who knew him and had battled under his direction understood perfectly. The devil had risen to life, once again.

"There used to be fifteen, but now, they are less." She did not

elaborate on that, at all. Without Ares beside her, she wove and collapsed. Marcus reached for her as she fell completely unconscious at his feet.

When he saw the broken arrow shafts in her back, his rage knew no bounds. *You left out a good deal in your story, my fierce one.*

He hollered with fury and fear. A yell that echoed off the surrounding hills and all over the surrounding countryside and forests. A cry that sent up flocks of birds to seek a safer haven as his anger flowed rampant. A roar that sent chills down the spines of everyone that heard it.

He picked her up and mounted his horse. "Home." The men quickly mounted and got ready to head off when they saw that Mary and Gavin were still on the ground.

Gavin reached for her, and Mary screamed and threw herself onto Ares leg as she shook. "Mary, you know me. I will not hurt you. We have to return Kit back to the castle. Will you let me put you up on Ares? You can ride him, and I will just ride along beside you."

Marcus was seconds away from telling his squire to toss her on the horse and get moving. The child wasn't important to him, getting Kit back and fixed was. Finally, she nodded, but she held herself stiff the whole time Gavin touched her. She relaxed visibly when he released her and stepped back.

She sat erect in the huge saddle and did not look left or right, just kept her gaze on Kit ahead of her. They set another grueling pace, and Marcus would admit surprise that Mary didn't utter one word of complaint. When they stopped for the night, Kit had regained consciousness.

Mary ran to Kit as soon as they had dismounted and she was settled. Marcus was about to stop the girl from touching her, for fear the pain it would cause, but Kit just gave a trembling smile and nodded at an unspoken question from the child. Mary lifted up the fur edge and slid in beside Kit, being careful. She curled up next to Kit and was asleep in no time, at all.

Gavin took care of the stallion, who was beginning to act up. By the time the men bedded down for the night, the night watch decided, there was a large black horse standing guard over two females huddled under a fur. Any other time, it was a scene that Marcus would have found amusing.

Nikolas, his half-brother, took the first watch with Hugh. Marcus

couldn't sleep, so he just sat as close as he could to Kit. His fear for her so great he wanted nothing more than to hold her tight. Her face was flushed and pain evident in the planes. She whimpered, and he'd just risen when a blood-curling scream rent the air. His men responded instantly, awake and ready to fight. Since the night was still moonless, they did not see anything past the fire they had going.

The scream came, again. This time, there were words babbled in it. He knew, now. Mary. She plead with her captors not to hurt her. To leave her alone. Her words were followed by heart-wrenching sobs.

A sharp pain penetrated her slumber. Kit struggled to tamper down a shriek. Even so, her own ears rang from the loud scream of fear coming from Mary. At her words, Kit pushed her own pain back and reached out to hold her closer. She sang a lullaby her mom used to sing to her when she'd had nightmares growing up, and Mary finally drifted off, clinging tight to Kit.

Marcus' gaze told her he wanted more explanation, especially given her injuries. The rest of the night passed without incident. Kit woke up, first. Her back was so stiff she did not know how she was going to move. *This wasn't right; she hurt so much. However, how would I know what it would feel like to get shot in the back with two arrows? Perhaps, this is what I'm supposed to feel like.*

Gently laying Mary on her side, Kit made sure she was well covered with the fur, protecting her against the cold morning. When she stirred, Ares mouthed her head and neck in a sign of affection. She looked at him and motioned him to drop his head. She wound her hands into his thick mane, and ignoring the sharp pain in her back, she had him pull her into an upright position.

Sweating with just that little bit of exertion, she was not sure how she was going to finish her morning tasks. Leaning on Ares, she headed off toward the trees. When she was finished, she stumbled back into camp. Kit noticed that the shafts were gone from her back; even so, it still hurt like the dickens. It felt like it was on fire. *Okay, more like I'm submerged in one of the layers of hell. I don't know how much more of this I can take. I want to succumb.*

Her needs taken care of, she checked Ares. Gavin had done a good job. While the injury was still open, and she needed to sew him up, he seemed to be moving fine, and the wound was clean.

She got him some grain and herself some bread. Man, what she

wouldn't give for a big breakfast. Hot coffee, sweet buns, scrambled eggs so fluffy they about floated off the fork. Lots of juice. Piping hot biscuits. Crisp bacon. Oh, this was murder; her mouth was watering. Must be a good sign if she was hungry.

She went to put the things back in the saddlebag, and she couldn't smother the gasp of pain that escaped her. There was a shadow of a man standing over her in a second. She looked up to meet Nikolas' brown eyes. He put her things away and helped her to sit.

"Since everyone appears to be awake, we will ride on." Marcus barely spared her a glance. *Is he still jealous over his own brother?*

Too deep in pain to deal with it, if that were the case, she spoke to Nikolas. "Could you assist me up, please?"

His grin informed her he knew what she was doing and grinned. She quickly got Mary up.

"Wake up, honey. It's time to go. Run into the bushes and take care of things then come back. You'll ride with me and Ares."

Mary lifted her lids, and if she was nervous looking up at the big Russian, she gave no sign. She disappeared quickly and came back even faster.

"Honey, after I get up there, Nikolas is going to lift you up to me. All right?" At her immediate look of fear, Kit spoke, again. "Mary, honey, I have to be lifted up, as well. I can't lift you. He won't hurt you. You know that I wouldn't make you do this unless absolutely necessary, but my back is way too sore." *And, I'm nauseous and drifting between consciousness and unconsciousness. Plus, I can't move my arms enough.*

"I know." Mary looked at Nikolas and inclined her head as well as a queen and said, "You may put her on. I am ready to mount, now."

With extreme gentleness, the large man lifted Kit into the saddle. *Going to make a nice husband one day, Mr. Russian warrior man, Nikolas.*

Turning to Mary, he offered a bow that belonged in court. When he straightened, he offered his hand. Mary reached out and took it without a bit of hesitation. Her only sign of fear was the slight tremble of her hand. Nikolas lifted her up and set her down in front of Kit. He placed the fur over the both of them. With a bow, he headed to his own mount.

"No!"

She started as Marcus' loud voice cut across the gathering of men.

"What are you doing up there? You will ride with me." Marcus rode Marauder toward her. "Get down."

Her gaze met his furious one. His concern touched her. "Marcus. We should be able to make it back tomorrow. I can ride him; I *can*." Come hell or high water, she'd find a way to stay on. She licked her lips and searched for some moisture for her throat. *I have to convince him we'll be okay. Who knows what or who else is after them.*

"Mary and I will be fine. I know Ares' gaits. He is much smoother than your horses, and I don't have to worry about him spooking at something. It just makes more sense. There is no reason for you to make your horse tired by carrying two adults when I have a horse. His wound will be all right. I can do this."

In a softer voice, she added, "I promise I will let you know when it becomes too much for me. Besides, if we do run into trouble you won't have to worry about us, because we will be on our own horse and can stay out of the way." That was funny since sitting upright was too much for her.

She realized when it hit him that she was right. He understood it would be hard for him to fight with her in front of him or behind him. He brusquely nodded. He kept his manner gruff; yet, his eyes told her a different story. Those eyes, beautifully green, were soft as they looked upon her. They sent her a message as if he had spoken to her in actual words. *I love you. Be careful.* She sent him a smile and nodded to let him know she understood. As he turned away, those same eyes became hard as stone.

They set a quick pace. Ares did well, and Kit's pain had long passed beyond any manageable level. Tears burned in her eyes as she focused merely on not passing out. It wasn't easy, and she drifted in and out of awareness. She spent a good chunk of time trying to distract Mary.

They ate in the saddle. They passed the location she'd come down the steep incline that Ares had reached the bottom at. The men looked up there and back to her on Ares. Kit ignored them all. They stopped when the horses needed a rest then headed on, again.

How she stayed on, she had no idea. The night grew cold, and Kit shared body heat with Mary and the fur they had covering them. The fever that was invading Kit's body also helped keep her warm.

Nausea swarmed once more, and she slowed Ares. "Slide forward, Mary." The second the girl did, Kit slid off. Marcus was there, supporting her and assisting her to the ground, which seemed so far away. So damn far.

Mary stayed up on Ares, wrapped in the fur. Kit barely made it to the ground before she lost the contents of her stomach. She shook from the pain and exhaustion.

Marcus placed a water skin up to her lips, and she took a drink to rinse out her mouth. She did. Completely wiped out, she slumped against his chest with one shoulder and just soaked up his heat and strength. He placed a gentle kiss on her head.

"Fierce one. I thought I had lost you. You scared me. Why did you go off on your own?" The tone informed her he wasn't asking for a response, just speaking. She longed to hold him, but her back would not allow that type of movement.

After standing that way for a bit, she pushed away from him. "We should keep going." Her voice was nearly non-existent.

He lifted her back on Ares, who for once just stood there instead of acting like an ass to Marcus. Her knight made sure the fur covered both Kit and Mary then he mounted his own horse. "We should be at the river, soon. It is almost dawn. Will you be all right?"

No, I think I'm about to enter the ninth circle of hell. "Yes. We'll be fine. Let's go."

They struck out, all quiet, having ridden all night long. Exhaustion was prevalent. They came to the castle in the early afternoon. The lookouts had seen them coming, and basically, the whole castle was there to meet them. Mary's mother was out front.

Kit rode Ares up to her and let her reach up to take her daughter in her arms. They were both crying. Kit turned away. Nauseous again, she looked down to see Marcus standing by her. Her vision blurred. He lifted her down, and Gavin came to take Ares off to the barn.

"I have to go and fix Ares, first." Was there determination in her tone? She wanted there to be. She wasn't sure it didn't sound more like a wheeze.

"And after?" His words were forced through clenched teeth.

"I'll go with you and not fight you, anymore, on this." *Probably because I will not have anything left.*

"Very well." Marcus led her to the stall where Ares was placed.

Kit barely made it to a garbage heap before she lost her stomach contents, again. Not that there was much in there, if anything.

Struggling to remain conscious, she asked for a needle and thread, along with some warm water and a clean cloth. When that came, she stumbled through cleaning and sewing up the wound. Thankfully, Ares stood firm through it and did not move nor make a sound. Sweat ran down her face by the time she'd finished, and her body trembled with a combination of pain and exhaustion. Not her best job for being done left-handed, but it would work.

Kit made it out of the stall and shut the door before she lost consciousness. Marcus caught her as she fell. Wetness coated his arm. He rolled her to her side to discover saw his arm was covered in blood, as was the back of her tunic.

He swept her up in his arms and headed for the castle at a run, shouting orders as he went. *I never should have let her continue on this way.* The servants all jumped and rushed to do his bidding. Duncan had already gone to get the village healer; an old woman who looked to be about a hundred years old. She was waiting inside the castle for them.

He took Kit upstairs to his room and laid her down on her stomach. The healer followed and sliced through her tunic. Looking at the two wounds, she then glanced sharply at the him. "My lord, you should leave, now."

"No. I will stay."

She shrugged and got to work. The woman demanded water, near to boiling. When the water came, she took some clean rags out of her basket and put two in the water. Her wizened gaze met his as she said, "Just know that what I do to her is to help her."

He noticed the look of discomfort on the woman's face as she shoved her hands in the water. She wrung the cloths out then placed them over Kit's wounds at the same time. Kit almost came off the bed; her scream curdling his blood. He was sure they heard it throughout the castle.

Marcus had to forcibly stop himself from sending the woman flying across the room. He dug his fingers into his hands, nails cutting into the flesh of his palms.

A greenish pus-like substance seeped from Kit's wounds. The old woman repeated her actions, time and time again. She stopped when the blood ran solely red; her own hands were blistered. After that, the old healer made a poultice and put it on each wound.

When she was done, she turned Kit's head to the side and forced a vile-smelling potion through Kit's lips.

"There is nothing you can do for her, my lord. She needs rest. She is young and strong; hopefully, that will be enough. Enough to save her."

He glared. "You had better hope that it's enough. I will remain with her." The old woman nodded, silently hearing and acknowledging the scantily veiled threat in his words.

"I will check back, in a while. You should get some rest, milord." She quietly shut the door behind her on the way out.

Dragging a chair up beside his bed, he picked up her hand. It was so lifeless. He enfolded it in both of his and placed a kiss on the back.

"Don't go. Don't leave me. You are so strong. Hang in there, my fierce one. You did it. You saved Mary. Come back to me, please. Don't leave me." Anguish altered his voice.

"Daddy? Daddy, I hurt. Daddy, it hurts. Make it stop." Her voice shook with her mumbles. "I met someone, Daddy. I think you'll like him. He's very special, a little different, but he is a knight, after all. He's very handsome and brave. I love him, Daddy. I think Momma will like him, as well. Where are you going? Daddy? I want to come with you. No, Daddy. Don't leave me. Daddy!" She screamed the last as her body jerked. Then, she fell silent, barely breathing.

He sat beside her, ignorant to anything else. He did not even recognize when the old woman came in to check on her, or when she left, again. Marcus lost track of the time as days and nights past. His entire being was focused on Kit. His beard grew, but he didn't leave her side. Only minute traces of food and drink found their way to his belly, and he grew as gaunt as the woman he held a silent vigil beside.

Inside him, he could feel the flame that she always made him feel start to flicker and fade. She was giving up. She had lost her will to live. The fever was winning. There was so much he wanted to say to her. There was so much he needed for her to understand. She was his heart. His warrior. His soul mate. His fierce one. And, she was dying.

He began to panic. She wasn't going to make it. She was completely immersed in the throes of a fever, and she had given up. "No, I won't accept it." He slammed his hand on the bed beside her. "You will not give up. Do you understand me? I command you to

come back to me. Damn you, come back and yell at me. Stand up to me. Don't you dare quit on me. Fight this, damn you. *Fight!*" His voice ended on a roar.

Nothing out of the woman lying there.

The smell of hot food penetrated Marcus' senses. He turned to snap at the person who dared to interrupt his fading time with her. It was Mary. She gestured at him with the tray.

"Go away." He growled at her, feral as a wolf defending its cubs. "No."

Shocked to the core that she would defy her lord and master, he turned to look at her with a gaze sure to send her running when he noticed that she was trying not to cry. "You need to eat, my lord." Her lower lip quivered as she tried to remain strong.

"I am not hungry."

"I will sit with her while you eat." She shoved the tray at him. It held a thick stew and freshly baked bread. Then, she gently pushed him out of the chair he was sitting on.

Marcus was so surprised at her audacity that he did not yell at her. He carried the food to the table, sat, and ate. Keeping one eye on the bed, he watched as Mary, the little girl who hummed to Kit and gently stroked her face. After he finished, he realized he was exhausted. He didn't want to leave her.

As if sensing his problem, Mary looked over at him and said, in a quiet voice, "You should be able to lay in the bed without bothering her."

He nodded and carefully lay down beside Kit. His exhaustion such that he fell asleep within moments.

αβ

Marcus pounded up the steps to answer Mary's summons. Kit had been consumed by the fever for ten days. When the call came from the girl, he responded instantly. Funny, she was the only one he felt comfortable leaving alone in the room with Kit. He opened the door to see Mary nodding to something Kit said.

"Katrina."

Her heavy-lidded gaze slowly swung toward him. She cracked a smile at him, and he thought it the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Mary backed out of the room, leaving the two of them together.

"Marcus. May I have some water, please?" A scratchy voice had never sounded like such a heavenly tone to anyone's ears.

"Aye. You can have anything you want." He got her some water and carefully helped her to drink it. "Ah, my fierce one. You gave me a scare." He placed a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"I would like to get up."

"No." She was not moving until she was completely healed, even if he had to tie her to the bed to make it so.

"I need to use the bathroom."

"What?"

She blinked and gave a small shake of her head. "Um. I need to relieve myself."

"Oh. Fine, I will help you."

"You can walk me over there, but I don't need help. I need to move around or I will stiffen up. I wish to see Ares. How is he doing?"

Marcus was loath to leave her on her own. As they headed back to the bed, he answered, "Gavin has been taking care of him. He is fine. You need to rest." He laid her back on her stomach on the bed.

"Later, then."

"After you rest for a while."

"How long have I been in bed?"

"This is day twelve; you have had fever for the last ten."

Nodding, she drifted off to sleep.

αβ

The next couple of days, she spent regaining her strength. She pushed herself to the limit. Marcus tried to keep her in bed; however, Kit resisted as much as she could.

The knowledge that she had been injured made her cautious, but there was no way she was going to stay helpless. She spent a lot of time in the stables with Ares, as his presence helped her. His own wound had healed nicely, just leaving a scar. The weather had gotten much colder and rainier.

Mary had become her shadow and followed her everywhere she went. She would tell on her to Marcus, as well, if she thought Kit was overdoing it at all, which seemed like to be quite often in Kit's opinion. Mary was slowly returning to the child she had been before the incident, full of effervescence and life. Gavin seemed to always be within earshot of the little girl when he was not fulfilling his duties. Kit noticed that Duncan and Hugh were gone but did not ask where they were.

The day came that Kit felt just about perfect, and she wanted to

go for a ride. That morning, she and Marcus had made slow and tender love. She mounted up on Ares and rode out of the castle with Marcus, Gavin, and Mary, who sat on a little gentle pony.

The ride started out perfectly. The weather crisp enough that frost lingered on the ground. The breeze that was blowing made her grateful for the protection of her duster, which had been patched up from the holes it had received. The horses were snorting and stomping with energy that only comes on a chilly, frosty morning.

As they rode toward the lake, they made small talk and listened to Mary chatter on about everything she saw. The child's face was ruddy from the air, and her smile looked like it was ready to jump off her face it was so large and bright.

The closer they got to the lake, the more nervous Ares got. He started to toss his head in agitation. His elegant neck arched and every sinewy muscle in his body was tensed. Had they been in a dressage competition, Ares would have made her proud with his perfect *piaffe*, the trot in place. His movements were striking. In the depth of her gut, Kit knew something was very wrong. She quickly and quietly brought her stallion back under control. She pulled him to a stop and looked at Marcus.

In the blink of an eye, Marcus maneuvered his gelding up alongside. "How do you feel?" Worry crept into his voice.

Her heart pounded. "Something's wrong. Get Mary back here. The lake is not safe." She kept her voice low but had no doubt he heard the stressful emphasis underlying her softly spoken statement.

"Gavin, you and Mary get back this way. Kit is tired and ready to go back." Both of them complied right away.

Chapter Eighteen

*White in the moon the long road lies,
The moon stands blank above;
White in the moon the long road lies
That leads me from my love.*

~A E. Housman

After the party had returned, Marcus rode out with a group of his knights. He'd felt it, too, while out with Kit and the others—the strange feeling—but nothing had appeared out of the ordinary. Ares had been as alert as Marauder was before a battle. With Kit safe behind the castle walls, he was going to check it out. They thundered over the ground to the lake and looked around.

One of his men found holes, and after much searching, they found some tracks that headed off into the woods. Marcus realized that they had been very close to being attacked and was very angry with himself for not sensing it and for placing them into harm's way.

The men filled the holes with some traps and covered them, again. On the way back to the castle, Marcus grew angrier. He knew, deep down inside, he knew Roger was behind this. Now that Kit was on the mend, it was time for him to go find Roger and take him before the king.

αβ

Upon her return from the ride, Kit headed to the kitchens to be with her friends. She didn't want to be alone, right then, and the kitchens just seemed to be the place for her to go. A warm cup of ale cradled in her hands, she desperately struggled to place her feelings in some kind of order. She was beginning to become more than a little scared. Life in this time was not an easy one. *Will I ever make it home?*

Lost in thought, she almost didn't notice when Marcus walked into the kitchens. The servants continued on with their duties since his presence had become more and more common with her presence here, so they no longer fell silent when he arrived.

Marcus touched her on the shoulder, and she jumped then looked at him. He ran one lean finger down the side of her face. She instinctively leaned into him, and she had to visibly pull herself away from his touch so she didn't crawl against him.

"I wish to speak with you. Will you come to the solar with me?"

She nodded as she stood. A bout of nausea hit her, and she paled. His strong hands were there to steady her, and he searched her face for an answer to what was going on with her. She shrugged. "Let's go." Tired and feeling sick, she made it to the solar with Marcus' assistance.

He escorted her to one of the chairs by the fire. He dragged another chair over, so when he sat, their knees touched. Couple. Fire burning in the hearth, she snorted at the irony. The scene presented was very intimate. They weren't technically a couple, for they only had a short time left.

"You did too much today. You should stay in bed tomorrow."

She struggled for a small smile and failed. "I'm just a little tired. If I don't get out and do things, then I will never get better."

Leaning forward, he picked up her hands in his. Her heart was heavy when she met his gaze.

"Let me have it."

He furrowed his brow, and she realized he didn't understand her comment fully. Regardless, he took a deep breath and said, "I have to go. I have to get Roger and take him before the king. His crimes cannot go unanswered." His gaze hardened. "What he did to you *cannot* be ignored. He dared to hurt what was mine. I will not let it go. He *will* answer for that transgression."

His protectiveness touched her, and still, her heart shattered into thousand tiny pieces. *Suck it up, Lawson. You knew this couldn't last.* She had known, but it still did not make how she felt any easier to bear.

"I don't want to leave you, my fierce one, but this has to be done." His intense green eyes never once wavered from her silver-gray ones. As if he believed that he could convey each and every one of his feelings in that one look. At that precise moment. For all eternity. "That man needs to be killed."

Putting forth a brave front, she again attempted a little smile. "I know. We both knew that this would have to end. I understand."

"No!" His fierce denial broke free. "No. This is *not* ending. I will come back for you. Do you hear me? I will come back for you. You belong to me." His tone vibrated with primal possessiveness.

He took a ring off his finger, his signet ring. It was his seal, which announced his position to the world. A heavy ring created of solid gold with a blue stone mounted on the top. A sapphire,

perhaps. Emblazed upon the stone was a raised symbol of silver; a sword encircled four times by a rope of black thorns. Once again, Marcus took one of her hands in his, turned it over, and placed the ring on her open palm.

Gently, he closed her fingers over it, placing a gentle kiss on each finger and, lastly, one on her wrist. He held up his hand for silence when she started to speak, merely saying, "This is for you. No arguments. I will come for you. I want to marry you and have you by my side as my wife. I will have you as my wife. Once Roger is taken care of, I will make this request to the king." His eyes flamed with a burning intensity that stunned her to the core.

Her eyes filled with tears. She was aware she'd never have a marriage proposal. Kit bit down on her lower lip as she shook her head. "You can't marry me. We both know that. Like your mother said, I am not the right person. I shouldn't keep this ring, either." She looked all around the room, everywhere but at the man in front of her, trying to pull herself back together. Grasping at any straw she could to fortify her resolve. Finally, she looked at him. Tears threatened to fall. "When do you leave?"

"In the morning. We found some things by the lake and... Well, the morning."

Kit bounded up out of the chair, knocking it over. She ran out of the solar without looking back or stopping to clean up the mess. She stumbled blindly out the door, into the buffeting winds that slammed stinging pellets of sleet into her exposed skin. The barn was her destination, and she found her horse. Throwing her arms around him, she cried herself out. His warm body and familiar scent helping calm her.

Marcus sat there like a stone after she ran. She'd moved so fast he hadn't had a chance of stopping her. He didn't go after her, just sat there mulling over what she said. *You can't marry me.* What did she mean by that? He loved her. She loved him, he knew she did. That's all that mattered. Sure, marriage was done to further status and for orders. But he'd fooled himself during this time he'd been allowed to have with her. He wanted to be bound for love. Not for any other reason.

He jolted from his thoughts when a servant came in the room to stoke the fire. When she left, Marcus buried his face in his hands, wondering how things had come to this. How had he believed this would ever be anything permanent? When had he changed so much

that he'd given in to grandeurs of love? That's right, when his life had intersected with one Katrina Lawson's.

A little later, he rose and went to Kit's room. She wasn't there, so he traveled to the kitchens. No sign of her in there; however, one of the servants pointed him in the direction of the stables. With his first step outside, the cold slammed into him, and he debated retreated back behind the protection of the thick stone walls. The weather was just nasty.

Marcus shivered and entered the barn where he strode right for where Ares was stabled. He calmed slightly when he heard her voice as she hummed some tune to her horse. Peering over the door, he discovered her brushing her horse. She appeared so vulnerable, yet, at the same time, so untouchable it nearly broke his heart.

She still wore some of Gavin's clothes, and they fit her like a second skin. Flickering light from the torch outside the stall bathed her skin in its glow.

Putting the brush down, Kit looked up at him in silence and walked out of the stall to his waiting arms. When he started to speak, she put her hand over his mouth and murmured, "I guess that means we have the rest of today and tonight." They walked back through the sleet to his castle, arm in arm.

Marcus took her to his coffer room. He let her in and closed the door behind them. Kit scanned the room, taking in jewels of every size, shape and color. There were gold coins lying around by the chest full. It was like a pirate's booty from a book. There were strings of pearls and other precious stones.

"Holy shit. I've never seen so many gems. This is incredible. All of it, beautiful."

There were also just plain chains. He noticed her staring at the numerous necklaces and handed her two chains, one gold and one made of silver. She smiled as she stared, then handed them back.

He refused to take them. "They are for you."

"I don't need them, but thank you, anyway." He gave her a frown, and she sighed. "How about a compromise? I'll take one." At his nod, she chose the silver one, as he had believed she would. She didn't wear gold. He fastened it around her neck and followed where it lay with kisses.

"Are you sure you won't take any more?"

Kit tried unsuccessfully to suppress the shudder that coursed

through her body. "I'm sure. And, your voice is like a heady liqueur, potent and making me crazy."

"I just want to make sure that you have something to sell if you ever anything and I'm not near to help." He dipped his head and kissed her. "I'm glad I make you crazy."

"I'll be fine, and I'm sure you are."

Marcus tugged her close, forgot all about talking, and proceeded to take *his* woman on a floor in a room filled with amazing riches. In spite of the wealth present, none of it commanded his senses the same as the ebony beauty he held in his arms.

They made love in that room in many different places and positions. Afterward, they went up to their chambers.

αβ

Kit slipped into her room to clean up and change. She secured his signet ring on the necklace and placed it back around her neck. Its heavy warmth settled between her breasts, making her all the more aware that it was time for her to leave.

Entering the room next to hers, Kit walked in on Marcus as he stood looking out his window, lost in thought. Coming up behind him, she slid her arms around his flat stomach and pressed her face to his back, inhaling his masculine scent. *I'm going to miss him.*

Marcus reached behind him and drew her around into his chest. He settled Kit against him, they stood like that, watching the clouds roll in and the sky turn dark.

Being in his arms made the world seem right. This is what contentment was like. Staying warm and feeling safe and protected in the arms of the one you love. Kit crashed back to Earth as she realized he was leaving tomorrow. She turned in the circle of his arms and looked up at him.

When he glanced down at her, she just about burst into tears. Tugging on his hand, Kit pulled him over to the chair he had by the fireplace. Wordlessly, she pushed him into the chair. Silence filled the room as she climbed into his lap and waited, once again, for his arms to enclose her in their warm embrace.

For a few precious moments, Kit wondered what it would be like to have this sense of security for the rest of her life. To have these arms always willing to hold her and keep her safe from harm. She knew what she had to do.

Spinning in his lap so she could face him, she cupped his face in her hands. He lowered his vibrant gaze to hers. He smiled. Kit took

a shaking breath and fought for control. "I want you to know something."

His face, that amazing work of art, got a little more somber as he waited for her to continue.

"I just wanted to thank you... No...um...well...yes...thank you. For being who you are. For letting me find and experience true happiness, even though it has to end. I just want you to know that I will never forget you."

She forged ahead, blinking back unwanted tears. "I know you have to go. So do I. I have to go home. Somehow. I have to find a way. I can't stay here. I need to be with my parents. I need to be in a place where I don't get strange looks because of something I said or clothes that I wear."

She tried to smile but it failed. "I didn't want you to go tomorrow without me having a chance to say goodbye. I won't be here when you return. I *can't*. I can't be here knowing you are married to someone else." Shaking her head when he tried to speak, she continued, "I know what you said. I would love nothing more than to marry you. I can't. You know it, and so do I. You have to marry someone that will benefit your station, and from the sounds of things, that is supposed to be Clarissa. I don't understand it, but it is how things work here in your time. *Your* time, not mine. I have to go home. I don't belong here."

Looking everywhere except at the man who had turned her life upside down and inside out, Kit struggled to hold back the flood of tears that threatened to open like Niagara Falls. Taking a breath, she got up off his lap. She maneuvered herself between his legs and tipped his head up toward her. She ran her thumb over his silky lips.

"I love you. I love you." Her voice was soft but firm with conviction, "I love you, Marcus Quinn, Baron of Blackthorne. I will never forget you. You will *always* be a part of me, and I will always love you." A lone teardrop ran the long trek down his face. With a gentle brush of her knuckles, she wiped it away as another started to fall. Kit leaned over and touched her lips to his, as light as a snowflake falling. "Remember. Always remember. From this life to the next."

Slowly, Kit rose. She walked away from him and out of his room without a single backwards glance, shutting the door silently behind her, completely oblivious to the tears streaming down her face.

Kit walked to the kitchens in a daze. She had stopped crying by the time she got there. Then, after a few moments, she headed for the solar.

She was fully in the solar before she realized that it was not empty. Marcus' mother was there. "I am sorry, ma'am. I did not realize anyone was in here." She'd thought they had gone for she'd not seen her for a while, but men's mothers had a way of sneaking up on people. Lady Quinn waved Kit forward and indicated for her to sit near her by the fire.

Sitting down, Kit was silent as she watched Jocelyn embroider.

"Do you sew?" The question surprised her. Kit didn't think Jocelyn would want to speak to her.

"No, ma'am. I don't." *Somehow, I doubt sewing up horses or cattle will suffice for this snooty woman.*

"Humph. My son should marry a woman that can sew."

"I hope Clarissa knows how, ma'am."

Jocelyn merely raised an eyebrow at that statement but kept sewing.

"His wife needs to be a proper lady. She should be respectful, able to run a household and should benefit his station. She should also bring in a decent dowry for him. She should wear proper clothes, and she should—"

Struggling hard not to lose her temper with this woman, Kit interrupted her. "I 'spect so, ma'am. How about I make this *lovely* conversation shorter? The woman your son marries should wear dresses, make him richer, help with his position of power, and give him heirs. She should never question him, or you, so she should also be spineless. Oh, yeah, and she should be white. Basically, she should be everything I'm not." Kit's own voice had gotten harder as she spoke what she felt.

Kit rose from the chair to look down at the bitter woman still seated. "If you are done throwing insults at me, I'll be on my way." At the door, Kit pivoted and added as an afterthought, "You know, it's such a shame that you're placing your happiness above that of your son's. I would have made him a wonderful wife. I bet you can't recall a time when he has been this content, or the castle has run so smoothly. You know, under Clarissa, it was a dirty mess. Don't worry; I know I can't marry your son.

"It is a shame when a mother makes her child chose between his happiness and her. I don't think you even know your son, at all.

You'd think that you would wish him to be happy, not bitter like you are. Ma'am." She shut the door behind her.

αβ

Finally having gotten himself under control after her declaration, Marcus went to find Kit. She wasn't in her room, the kitchens, the great hall, or the solar. Not sure what to make of it, he asked some of the servants if they had seen her. They said she had taken her things and headed outside.

He dashed through the rain to the stables. He found her crouched, tying her things onto the back of her saddle. Her wet coat was draped over the stall door. Her leathers were damp as she set about her task.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting my things ready to go." Kit didn't even look up at him when she said this.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure. All I know is I have to find my way back home." Standing, she brushed past him to the door of the barn and peered out. He watched the storm rolling in. Fog came in full tilt, and the hairs the back of his neck rose. There was an electrical feel to it, it fairly hummed. Then, the next instant, it was gone, and the rains came.

Most women I know would have come in from the rain, but not this one.

Marcus came up behind her and ran his hands over her wet body. He, too, was soaked in seconds. Oblivious to the stableboys, he swung her up in his arms, carried her to an empty stall and laid her down in the straw. He joined her in mere seconds. Soon, all there was coming from the stall were moans of pleasure.

A whicker woke him up. Instantly alert, Marcus watched Kit move about the stall in silence. She dressed and slipped free. Marcus stood as she went over to the one her stallion was in. *What is she up to?*

He crossed his arms. "Where in the hell do you think you are going?"

She jumped and shot a glare at him over her shoulder. "Thanks for scaring the crap out of me. Out to check what is going on."

She led Ares down the aisle, and Marcus fell into step behind her. The rain had slowed, but the fog had come back. The same eerie feel was back in the air. Marcus stopped, thinking back. *This is*

the same feel to the air the day she came into my life. He panicked. She was right; it was time for her to go.

He shook his head and lengthened his stride until he was at her side. He wasn't ready to let her leave. He boldly picked her up, ignoring her horse, tossed her over his shoulder, and headed for the castle. Marcus ignored her cries of outrage.

He strode into the castle, wet and carrying a very angry woman on his shoulder. Everyone stopped when he burst in the door and stared. Not even realizing he had an audience, he dropped her to the ground and forced her chin up.

"You will not go back out in this until the fog is gone. Understand? Don't test me on this or I will lock you in your room." He strode over to the fire and stuck his cold hands out over the heat.

Not quite sure what just happened, Kit stood dripping on the floor until a servant handed her some towels to dry off with. Wrapped in a warm blanket, Kit moved to solar. Frustrated, she sat on the cushions by the window. *He'll lock me in my room? What the hell am I, a child?* She stared into the elements at war outside the castle. The fog seemed to part at her gaze.

She saw some figures in the distance. Squinting, she smothered a gasp when she saw who it was. It was her parents. Her mom was crying, and her dad was trying not to. The view offered to her grew as she saw the front yard at her parents' ranch, covered by numerous search and rescue.

She couldn't understand what they were saying but leaned toward the window as if that would enable her to better hear. Her mother had her hands on her hips, and her foot was tapping fast. Sure sign she was angry.

Kit swung her glance to her father. He stood at attention. It was that military stance. He was also trying to control his temper; the way he flexed his right hand gave that away to her. Giving an abrupt shake of his head, he turned to his wife and placed his hand on her back, leading her back indoors.

Abruptly, the vision vanished.

"No, wait. Come back," Kit begged, fingers splayed on the cold glass. Her body was tingling as if she had some kind of electrode applied to her body.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the fog lightened a little, again. Staring intensely, she tried to will the vision to return.

Momma. Daddy. Where are you? What's going on? There was trouble, and she needed back to help.

More people. Her parents leaned over a body on the bed. Another figure walked into view, a doctor. He spoke to her parents then left. Who was on the bed? When her dad moved back, she inhaled sharply. It was her.

Her mom was crying, begging her not to die.

A call echoed by her father, and it broke her heart. Kit didn't understand. *I'm dying?* The pain was so strong she could feel it like someone had stabbed her in the chest with a knife.

She had to go now. Her mom's voice faded away, but she still understood what she said. "*Naku penda, Katrina.*" *I love you, Katrina,* in Swahili.

Kit lunged to her feet, the blanket she had been wrapped in lay around her feet, causing her almost to fall on her face as she headed for the great hall. More importantly, the front door. She had to leave, no matter what.

She ran in to find a commotion going on. Marcus met her, grabbed her hand, and pulled her with him as he stepped back outside.

The riders finally came into view, Hugh and Duncan. They were exhausted, along with their horses. Servants hastened to see to their needs. Duncan came up the steps, pausing to nod at them both.

"The king. He comes. He is about one to two hours behind us. He is bringing Clarissa with him." Neither he nor Hugh glanced at Kit when they gave him this news.

In her periphery, she witnessed the downturn of Marcus' mouth. "Why? Why is he coming here? I am to be going to London, soon."

Hugh answered, "He heard rumors that you were sheltering a spy. He heard she was a witch and is coming to see for himself. To make sure you are still loyal to him."

A spy. The king. Instinctively, Kit knew what would happen if the king found her here. She would be killed. Death in this time meant death in her time. *Which explains what I saw from my parents. I die here, what I saw comes to pass.* It was time to go.

"A spy? Who would have told him that? Never mind. I believe I know." Marcus pulled Kit closer to his side. "We will meet the king, and he will see that she is not a spy. Then, I will ask his permission to marry her." He released her and turned and started issuing orders to the servants.

"I wonder what the king is like?" Kit spoke out loud before she realized she had. This was one situation she intuitively knew she would not come out of a survivor. She reached out to squeeze Marcus' hand, one more time, needing to touch him, just one last time. He squeezed back but did not stop issuing orders. Kit dropped his hand as her heart began to weep. She started backing down the steps.

The fog crashed back in. Not even the entrance to the castle could be seen clearly. Kit realized that this was how she was to go home. Pivoting, she looked at her future, her time, she turned tear-filled eyes to her past one last time. She loved Marcus so much.

Kit stared at his features one more time as she memorized his broad shoulders, narrow waist, muscular thighs and calves. Large hands that could wield a sword with deadly accuracy or caress her face as if she were made of the most delicate of all dewdrops. Green eyes that did not solely have one color but many shades which varied depending on his mood. Lips that most definitely had been made for kissing. That smile. And his embrace that made her feel so safe, so loved and so complete.

Kit closed her eyes briefly to make sure she had him committed to memory. She opened them and took one last, one final look at the baron that had stolen her heart.

Stifling a cry, she realized that the bottom of the castle steps had been reached. It was time to leave. Without removing her tear-blurred vision from the man, who in her mind was near to perfect in every single way, she hailed her powerful stallion with a sharp, piercing whistle.

Ares, having been left out of his stall, answered his mistress with a shrill clarion call of his own. It shattered through the fog like the sun bursting through the clouds after a rain and hung on the moisture in the air as it lingered. Massive hooves pounded as her horse, dark as a coal-black night, materialized out of the fog to halt beside her. Tears streamed down her face even as she swung into the saddle and he leapt away with the faintest touch of her heels.

Marcus turned as he heard the whistle. The whistle that he knew would change his life, all over again. He knew he would not—could not—ever be fast enough, no matter how quick he was. He only just stopped the denial that threatened to pour from his lips. Standing tall with silent pride and anguish, Marcus watched as she rose high into her saddle. As soon as she settled, the rains came back in with

a vengeance. She looked so goddess-like, so regal, sitting proud on the back of a horse he knew he would never again see the like of.

He stood helplessly as her horse reared up and lunged away disappearing into the fog. *I will always love you, my fierce one.* He sent the thought after her as if she could hear it.

From this life to the next. The phrase came back to him on the raging winds. Marcus smiled a sad smile while his tears mixed with the rain that now poured down. He knew that she had heard.

Going into his castle, defeated, Marcus went to change into some dry clothes. The castle felt empty. There was a hole in his heart. He walked back out of his room to see his mother approaching. His mother. Children. He wouldn't ever have children with Kit, never get to hold a tiny replica of her in his arms. With a shake of his head, he tried to focus on the things ahead of him.

"A word with you, Marcus."

"Yes, Mother? What is it? I have things to do; the king will be arriving soon."

"The king? Why is he coming here?"

He ignored her question, repeating his own. "What is it, Mother?"

He read the inquiry about his wellbeing in her gaze. He didn't care to broach the subject, however.

"Well, Mother?"

"I just wanted to apologize for my treatment of Kit. I spoke with her earlier, and I am sorry to say I wasn't very nice. I did some thinking, and I realized that I was wrong to try and force you to do something that, apparently, only I wished for you. I really do like her and will support you if you decide to marry her." She stopped when he held up his hand.

He looked down at his mother. "None of that matters. What you said to her, or to me. It doesn't matter." Anger corded his voice.

"I know I am only your mother, but I thought that my feelings might count for something," she snapped.

"I do care, Mother. It doesn't matter, because she is gone. She left. You will never see her, again. If you will excuse me, now, I have other things to attend." He was resigned to his fate, no matter how unacceptable it was.

Marcus walked off down the hall, stopped before the stairs and looked back at his mother. "In case you wondered or cared, she did not leave because of you." Marcus did go down the stairs, then, and

oversaw the last-minute preparations for the king's arrival.

Chapter Nineteen

*She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps,
And lovers are round her sighing:
But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps,
For her heart in his grave is lying*

~Thomas Moore

America

“Kevin! Kevin! She’s waking up. She’s awake.”

Kit slowly opened her eyes at the voice that sounded so familiar. It took a few moments to realize she was staring into her mother’s brown eyes. A movement overhead made her look up into eyes so like her own. Her daddy. She was home.

In bed.

Kit shut her eyes against the onslaught of nausea that rocked her body. Slowly, she opened them to see a hot mug of tea, peppermint by the smell, being set on the nightstand. Her dad helped her to sit up, and she slowly drank some of the tea. As her stomach settled, she realized that she either had the weirdest dream or something.

“How did I get here?” Her voice was scratchy.

“We brought you here, honey. Do you remember what happened?” Her mother gently stroked the side of her face.

“No.” Her throat hurt from talking just that little bit.

“We found you up in the mountains, having gone to look for you a week after you should have returned. Ares had an injury on his haunches that had healed, and you had scars on your back. What happened?”

“Halla, she just woke up. Don’t push her.” Her father’s gentle drawl washed over Kit, bringing tears to her eyes. “Here now, baby girl. None of that. You’re home, and everything will be all right.”

“Kevin, someone hurt my baby, and I want to know who.”

“Halla.” Her father took her mother by the arm and led her over to the door. “She just woke up. Let her tell us in her own time. It will be all right.”

“I know. I’m sorry, it’s just that I almost lost my baby.”

“Me, too, darlin’. We both did. She’s fine. She will be fine. She’s a Lawson.” Kevin placed a gentle kiss on his wife’s lips.

They walked back over to the bed. Kit felt sore all over. She raised her hand to her mouth and touched her lips like she would

be able to figure out what happened. That movement made the chain on her neck move. With her parents watching her, she pulled the ring out from her shirt.

She stared at the item. A heavy gold ring with a raised symbol in silver was on top of a blue stone. A sword encircled four times by a rope of thorns, lay on top of a sapphire. The artwork was amazingly intricate. It all came back to her. Like a wave crashing on the shore.

“Marcus,” she whispered, seemingly having forgotten her parents sat there by the bed watching her.

“Who is Marcus, baby girl?” Her father’s calm voice brought her back.

“How is Ares?” Kit ignored her father’s question, for she did not want to think about Marcus. *I can’t face that stuff, right now.*

“He’s fine. Resting in one of the box stalls. The vet checked him out. His sustained wound is healing fine. He did leave some cream to apply that will assist in regrowth of hair. Otherwise, he seems to be fine, just tired.”

It helped to speak of things that were familiar to her. Even so, she understood her father was trying not to push her, but his patience was running thin.

“Kevin, will you go down and bring up some food for her?” Her mom had to push him out the door. She took her seat back beside Kit on the bed. “Is there anything you wish to tell me, honey, before he comes back with some food?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You eat and then get some more rest. We can talk later.”

A while later, her father walked in the room, bearing a tray full of food. Her stomach rolled and heaved.

“I’m not really hungry.”

At her mom’s direction, he set the tray down within reach.

“We’ll let you get some rest, honey. Call us if you need anything.” Halla shooed her husband out ahead of her. Before she shut the door behind her, she looked back at her only daughter.

“You need to eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.” She snapped like a petulant child, tears threatening over the loss of Marcus.

A mistake, for her mother was nothing if not firm in her beliefs on how children should behave, no matter what their age.

“Katrina Andrea Lawson!”

Uh oh. The full name. She was in trouble. Her mom glided back

over to her; even mad, her mom still moved like a queen.

“Listen up, young lady, and listen well, for I am only going to say this one time. You may not feel hungry, but you need to eat. Your body needs nourishment. Even if you don’t wish to, you can’t only think of yourself, anymore.”

What was she talking about? At the question in her daughter’s eyes, her mom’s expression smoothed out.

“You don’t know, yet, do you?” Her mom took Kit’s hand as she sat beside her on the bed. “Honey, you’re pregnant.”

“What?” That word was yanked from her with force. *Pregnant? I’m pregnant?* She was going to have Marcus’ baby. She sat in shock as tears could no longer be contained and ran down her face. At least she would have a part of him forever. Even if she couldn’t have him in person, part of his essence would always be with her. Her fingers drifted along her abdomen.

“Are we pleased at the news? Who is the father?” Her mom asked the question almost as if she was scared to hear the answer.

Kit paused, fingers tightening on the blanket over her lap, as she thought about her response. “He is a man that I will never forget. I think the best way to describe it is, he’s to me what Dad is to you. I’ve never met anyone like him.” And, she never would, again.

“Is it this man Marcus?”

“Marcus. His name is Marcus Quinn.”

“Good. When do we meet him?” Her father’s voice broke in, surprising them both. He stood at the door like he was ready to go into battle.

αβ

England, 1103

As the king and his traveling circus entered his courtyard, Marcus realized he needed to get a hold of his temper. He waited until the king himself was approaching the door before he stepped out of the shelter of the castle. Watching the man he had sworn his allegiance to dismount, Marcus found himself wondering about his motives.

He understood he had sworn fealty to him, but there was just something about this that smelled rotten. He bowed in acknowledgement of his liege lord and rose when told to.

“My liege. It is a pleasure to see you. I have rooms ready for you and food prepared, if that is your wish.”

“Marcus,” the king boomed. “Look at you. Come, come, let us

retire in. We wish to get out of this infernal cold.”

With a nod, Marcus stepped back as he allowed his king to enter before him. Marcus followed, not even acknowledging the fact that Clarissa was with the king.

Once the king had banished the chill from his body, he waved Clarissa over to him. Taking her by the hand, he sought out Marcus with his gaze and beckoned him over.

“My king. Was there something you wished?”

“Marcus. We must tell you, we have heard disturbing rumors that you were offering sanctuary to a spy. We heard she was a witch and had fair bewitched you. Tell us, has our favorite vassal done such a thing?”

Ignoring the smug look on Clarissa’s face, Marcus answered his king. “Nay, milord. There was a woman who stayed here, for a short time, but there was no spy, and I was not under any spell. May I ask where you heard such a rumor?”

At the slight raising of the king’s eyebrows, Marcus amended, “I mean no disrespect, my king; it is just that I have had attacks on my castle and my lands. One of my servants and a child were taken, and one was murdered. There have been attempts on my life, as well. It is only a matter of time before we bring the one responsible for this in.”

“Who dares to attack one of our most loyal vassals?” The king’s face became a blotchy red as he took another swig of his drink. Anger slurred his words.

Marcus pinned his stare on Clarissa, who blanched. She leaned down and made her excuses to the king and left in a hurry. Duncan and Hugh joined them and, along with Marcus, filled the king in on recent events.

The king was properly upset when he found out about Roger. They made no mention of Clarissa, since he doted on his ward. Some said she was much more than just a ward to him. After a lot of talking and more drinking, the king stood and waved his arms for silence.

When the great hall had fallen in silence, the king stood and, after some stumbling over his words, said, “We are pleased to make this announcement. After much time and thought, it gives us great pleasure and joy to announce the upcoming marriage of our ward, Clarissa, to one of the most valued and feared knights in our service, Sir Marcus Quinn.” The king sat down heavily after his

announcement, looking very pleased with himself.

Marcus felt like a knife just plunged into his stomach. Marriage. To her. Quickly concealing his emotions, Marcus looked around and saw the pity on the faces of each and every one of his servants and close friends. All the others appeared very excited and happy. More drinks were poured, and the guests got even louder.

Clarissa came over and sidled up along him. Placing her pale hand inside his sun-darkened one, she smiled up at him. "I told you, one day, we would be married." Her soft voice reached only him.

Marcus squeezed her hand until she tried to pull out of his painfully tight grasp. He spoke to her, his voice deceptively calm, "We may have to marry, because I can't go against my king. Don't think it will be anything more than in name only." He dropped her hand like it burned him.

Jocelyn bowed to the king, spun, and ran out of the room up to her bedchamber.

Moments later, after his mother disappeared, Marcus walked in her chamber. "You. You did this, didn't you? How could you?"

"Son. I am so sorry. I didn't realize..."

Marcus cut off her excuses with a wave of a hand. "No, you didn't. You never realize, do you? I have nothing else to say to you, except that the line ends with me. I will give you no grandchildren." He spun on his heel, stalked out of the room, leaving his mother to her tears.

Chapter Twenty

Tomorrow is another day.

~Anonymous

America

“Well, baby girl, when do we get to meet him?”

More tears threatened as she looked up at her parents. “I don’t think ever, Daddy.”

At the looks on their faces, she took a deep breath to try and explain what happened when she was up in the mountains.

“Mom. Dad. There is something I have to explain to you. Please don’t interrupt until I am done. I am not crazy, really, just hear me out, please. Please.” Waiting for their nods, she continued as her parents sat on either side of her on the bed. “This is what happened to me...”

αβ

England, 1106

“Another missive, milord.” Gavin stood at the flap of his tent, waiting to be allowed entrance. When he was waved in, he hurried to do so.

“Who is it from, Gavin?” Not really caring but knowing the question was expected of him, Marcus stopped shaving his beard while he waited for Gavin to answer him.

“The baroness, Lady Blackthorne.”

He sneered. “I know who the baroness is. Read it to me. The practice will be good for you. I don’t believe that she could have anything of import to discuss with me.”

“As you wish, milord.” With a deep breath, Gavin slit open the seal on the missive, and after slanting another glance at his lord, he began.

“My lord. I hope this finds you well. We do well here, but the nights grow cold and lonely. I wish you could be here with me to help keep me warm instead of off fighting to get Normandy. I have something to discuss with you upon your return. I have decided, after three years of marriage, it is time for you to have an heir. I anxiously await your return so we can begin starting your legacy. Your devoted servant.” Clearing his throat, Gavin looked up at his lord. “That is all it says, milord.”

“Very well. Nice job, Gavin. You are quite the scholar, now.

Take it and burn it. I have no wish to see it.” Marcus went back to shaving. A child. Not on her life. Their marriage was just barely consummated. That one time was only because the virago had slipped into his bed late one night while he was altogether gripped in the passionate throes of a dream about Kit. He awoke just before his seed spilled into his wife’s depths and managed to pull out in time. So furious with her scheme to become pregnant, he left Blackthorne for six months that very night.

The few nights he slept home now were spent in a room far away from his self-appointed lady of the castle. He never forgave her for her treachery. Even after the capture and killing of Roger, Clarissa’s deception was just too fresh in Marcus’ mind.

His callused hand went to the simple gold chain around his neck upon which there was a small silver ring. Just a plain band. It had been Kit’s. He had taken it from her things when she’d first arrived. After she’d vanished, he had pulled it from the bottom of his chest and put it on a gold chain around his neck. It was the other of the two chains Kit had held when they had been in his treasure room. He never took it off.

Kit. His heart ached every day for her. His sleep was tormented by dreams of her growing large with child. There was usually a tall brown-haired gentleman with her. Marcus had visions he couldn’t explain, seeing things he had never seen before and had no idea what they were.

Marcus took the most dangerous assignments and put himself at risk, as often as possible. Duncan and Hugh had both fallen in love with nice women and had gotten married. They were deliriously happy. Marcus was miserable.

He’d gone with his brother when Nikolas had returned to Russia. That was right after Marcus’ wedding. He was traveling on his wedding night, without the bride. He’d returned and immersed himself in battles and still more traveling. He spent more time with his soldiers. The very sight of *his wife* made him sick.

Upon his return to England, he’d resumed up his search for Roger. That had taken almost a year for him to catch him. But, he had. And Roger had paid for his crimes. Marcus was gaunt and had a haunted look about him. He truly fit his nickname, the Devil. Hair, left uncut, flowed past his shoulders. He dressed only in black. He had allowed his beard to return, adding to the shaggy appearance.

Gavin left the tent and did as he was asked. After he finished shaving, Marcus left his tent and swung up on his new horse, Zeus a gray gelding, to go for a ride. Alone. Finally alone, with only his ghosts to haunt him, Marcus began to relax. He knew there was no reason for him to keep his men here. They deserved to go home to their families before they had to go back to battle for their king. His motives were purely selfish in not going home; he had no desire to see the woman who was supposed to be his wife.

Marcus faced his horse toward camp and headed back in that direction. The clouds flowed in, bringing with them the promise of rain. The mist came, first, and knowing that he would be wet before he got back, Marcus decided there was no reason to rush. The mist was getting thicker, and he could make out some figures in it. He rested his hand on his sword and peered into the haze.

The figures were fuzzy, but he knew one of them like he knew the beat of his own heart. Katrina. Kit. People surrounded her, and they were laughing. Her belly was flat once again, and yet, somehow, she looked fuller. Her body was more curved, like a woman who had finally grown into herself. If Kit had been beautiful before, now, she was stunning. His breath caught in his throat.

She was wearing a dress. No, she was wearing a damn flimsy piece of material. It fit her body, leaving nothing to the imaginations of the men who surrounded her. There were no sleeves as it rose up her chest and fastened around her neck. It was made from a gossamer silver material that lay on top of a rich midnight blue silk. The material cupped her breasts like lover's hands, like *his* hands had done when they were together. She wore long silver gloves that went up past her elbows. She was exquisite.

They stood outside, and the wind picked up for the tall gentleman next to her put his cloak around her shoulders and slipped his arm around her waist. Marcus couldn't believe that a person would ever be tortured in this way. Maybe she did not remember him. That thought became more prevalent when he saw her turn her face up and smile at the man. The smile was full of trust. And love.

"*Katrina.*" The name slipped out of his mouth in a tormented gasp.

αβ

One year later

Katrina smiled and laughed at the appropriate times. Although

she was starting to wonder at the wisdom of wearing this dress. The sleeveless blue and silver dress had seemed like a good idea, at first, but now, she was definitely having second thoughts. Not only was the wind picking up, but some of them men were looking at her like she was part of their dinner, the dessert part.

She knew the image she presented. The silver material overlaying the midnight blue made her appear almost untouchable, celestial. She looked as if she had been taken from the night sky and some of the stars had followed her to Earth with the sole purpose of illuminating her. The light caressed her and made her hauntingly beautiful.

This was not how she had wished to spend her evening, but she had promised her father to go with him to the American Quarter Horse Association dinner where he was to receive an award. With her mom at home, tired from just getting over a bout of weakness brought on by the Sickle Cell disease, Kit hadn't felt able to refuse joining her father for the honor bestowed upon him.

Her mother had felt well enough, however, to take care of her two grandchildren. Kit had given birth to twins. A son she named Marcus Kevyn Lawson and a daughter she named Ebonee Victoria Lawson. Everyone called them Marc and Evie.

The men standing with her and her father were mostly very nice men, just not what she wanted. Not *who* she wanted.

She felt near to naked with the looks they were gracing upon her. Her father settled his thick woolen coat over her shoulders. She inhaled his faint smell of cigars and aftershave and felt safe and warm. When he placed his arm around her waist, she leaned into him with a smile. Kit had refused to date anyone since she had her children. The wind whipped around her, carrying a faint noise to her ears as they made their way to the doors.

Katrina.

A moment of hesitation at the all too familiar thrum, which that particular voice and it alone gave her body, she turned back. Kit stared off into the city, searching. Her gaze sailed past the buildings and hustle of the metropolitan area as they faded from her sight.

She searched for what had been, and never could be, again. She touched the silver chain at her neck with one elegantly gloved hand and blinked back the prick of tears. She, then, reached out to the air as if she were trying to place a hand, for one last sensual caress, on a lover who just stepped out of reach. As her hand dropped back to

her side, she spoke, as if hoping to see the flesh and blood creation her words formed.

“Marcus. From this life to the next.” Her words spoke her grief. Relayed her true feelings to the one who had been lost to her. Kit shook her head before she turned on her heel and went to join the rest of the men.

αβ

England, 1106

Stunned, Marcus watched as she turned away from the group of men and faced him, searching for something. Marcus observed as she touched her necklace and, then, reached out a hand. It was as if she caressed his face; he could almost smell her fresh, clean scent. Nearly felt her warmth touch him as he longed for each and every night.

He leaned into her phantom stroke. He felt his heart stop as she lowered her hand and tried to smile. Tears glistened in her lovely eyes, and Marcus wished he could wipe them away. Her mouth moved, but he couldn't make out what she said.

She was gone, disappearing into that odd-looking building, following after the group of men. He took a deep breath and tried to stop his entire body from trembling. The entire scene had given every appearance of being so real. The winds picked up as he picked up the reins of his horse. Spurring his horse on, he refused to peer back where he had seen her in his vision.

Marcus.

From this life to the next.

He just about fell off his ride. That voice. Kit's voice. It whispered to him, to his soul. The longing in that voice, the *need*. It called him. It screamed to him. She loved him. She needed him. He needed her.

I must be going crazy. He thought as he kneed his horse on. It was as if there were demons after him. There was one. Kit. Katrina. He could not escape her, awake or asleep; she was all he could think about.

He could see his encampment just over the rise. He did not want to go back there, either. Marcus was torn. He needed to find a way out of this nightmare. He rode hard into camp, sawing so hard on his horse's reins that he almost sat down.

“Pack up, men. We are going home.” His announcement rang through those gathered.

Enthusiastic cheers from the men echoed throughout. They were packed and headed back in no time.

There was a big feast for the knights when they made it back to Blackthorne castle. The men all were deep into their cups when Marcus left the celebration to go to his chamber. He swung open the heavy oak door to his chamber to the sight of his wife lying there. She lay in wait for him.

“Welcome home, milord.” She fairly purred. “I had hoped you wouldn’t drink very much tonight. I have my own celebration planned.”

Marcus looked dispassionately at this pale, blonde woman lying on his bed in blatant invitation. She was as bare as the day she had been born. He could do nothing except compare her to the beauty he dreamed about every night. His body was not responding to her. Well, that wasn’t entirely true; his body was repulsed by what he saw there. He’d even tried to take a woman with dark hair and a darker complexion but that had not worked either. Nothing could erase the memory of Katrina’s persona from his mind. He spun around and walked out of the door. Heedless of Clarissa’s cries that followed him down the hall.

Aimlessly walking the halls of his castle, Marcus found himself in front of his coffer room. He entered and found himself looking at the riches he had. Kit had been right when she said that riches weren’t anything without love. He was one of the richest barons in the king’s service, and yet, he felt poorer than a servant. Picking up a couple large handfuls of gems and gold coins he put them into a pouch at his waist. Currency would be needed to travel. He, then, left and headed to the kitchens.

The kitchens, after having once been a place of great joy, were now hushed and somber. Old Edith had passed on about two years ago, and Mary’s mother had taken her place. There was no one in there, at this time, except Mary. She was trying to move a big cauldron all by herself.

Not sure why the kitchens were deserted or why Mary was still at work, he approached her. “Let me move that for you.”

She jumped at his words. She looked up and, then, quickly looked away from him, curtsying as she did. Her voice shook, with what he wasn’t sure, when she answered, “I have it, milord. I can do it.”

She used to look him in the eye and smile at him—when Kit was

around—she had even stood up to him, at one time. In fact, none of the servants would speak to him, anymore, unless it was a matter of importance. When had his home become so dreary? It had been so full of life. Unfortunately, he knew that answer, as well.

It changed the night the fog had swallowed up Kit.

“I insist. Where do you need it?”

“I just have to move it over there.” She pointed to the other side of the room. “Milord, I will get it. It is my job.”

Shaking his head at her stubbornness, Marcus picked up the heavy iron pot and moved it for her. When it was where she reluctantly instructed, he smiled down at her. She would not meet his gaze.

“Thank you, milord.” She dropped into a curtsy and started to back away from him.

“My pleasure, Mary. Will you sit with me a spell?”

Her eyes snapped up at that request. He nodded and patted the bench next to him. She came up like he was a hunter and she was a deer, ready to bolt at the slightest hint of danger. Silently, she slid onto the bench, and once again, her eyes lowered.

“How are you doing, Mary? Is there anything you need?”

“Nay, milord.”

“Are you happy here?”

“Aye, milord. Of course we are happy here. Have we done something wrong, milord? Are you going to dismiss me an’ me mum?” Her voice filled full of panic and fear.

Marcus smiled. “Of course not. I was just wondering how you were doing.” Did they really see him like that? Was he that much of a monster to them, now? “I’m glad you are happy here.” He looked off into the emptiness of the kitchens that mirrored the emptiness in his heart.

“You miss her still, don’t you, milord? I do. I keep hoping she will come back. But, I don’t think she will. Ever.” Mary gazed up at him, her eyes filling with tears.

Marcus shot to his feet. After three years, he was still not ready to talk about Kit, not with anyone. Not sure how to handle this, he just decided that avoiding her question would be the best way. He strode to the doorway, and against his better judgment, he stopped there, where he turned back to the young woman who was growing into her own. She would be a beauty in her own right, someday. “Aye, I do. Everyday.” Then, he left silently, leaving the girl to her

memories of happier times.

Not wanting to rejoin the festivities and definitely not wanting to go upstairs where he knew Clarissa waited for him, Marcus strode out toward the stables. He ordered a horse to be readied for him. While he waited for the request to be taken care of, he wandered out of the barn. The night was foggy, although not unusual for this time of year. Moonlight struggled to penetrate it, making the fog almost appear to be made up of little flickering torches.

Mounted on a brown gelding, he rode away from the castle. As he settled into his ride, he automatically went for the lake. Riding just to clear his head, and hopefully, by the time he got back, Clarissa would be asleep. His horse stopped, stamped the ground nervously, and sidestepped, a few times.

The fog ahead of him parted. His fingers closed over the hilt of his sword, instinctively ready for whatever may be approaching. As if by magic, a large inky-black horse appeared, coat gleaming in the muted moonlight as it charged across the meadow toward Marcus. The fog seemed to move aside just for the horse, because after he passed, it billowed back, erasing all traces of his presence. Breath catching in his throat, Marcus believed it was a demon horse. Believed it was Ares. His own horse reared up in fear, threw him off his back, and tore off running.

This is what I get for thinking about Ares—tossed on my ass. Embarrassed and angered, Marcus stood, rolling his shoulders to get the kinks out. It was a good thing no one was around to witness that humiliation. It'd been a long time since a horse had thrown him.

The oncoming horse hadn't slowed. The thrown knight could see the breath coming out of its nostrils, and the very ground he stood upon shuddered from the rumble emanating from the black's pounding hooves. Marcus remained frozen. He couldn't bring himself to move, even though he knew it would be a wise idea.

Screeching to a halt, the horse stopped, only just inches away from Marcus. The fog that had followed raced back in, swirling around his legs making the equine appear almost ghostlike. Like a wraith. Phantom. Demon. Those small pricked black ears swiveled forward, and the head tipped down to where one nut-brown eye stared directly at Marcus from beneath a thick black forelock. Or through him. He snorted, the warm air informing Marcus it wasn't a

dream.

Steam rose in tiny spirals from the magnificent animal. The horse pawed one large hoof then walked around to stand behind him. Marcus remained immobile. He couldn't move. Then, the apparition snorted from behind him, startling him slightly.

Marcus turned and looked at a horse he had honestly and completely believed he would never see, again. He saw the scar on his haunch and knew without a doubt it was Ares. Or else his mind was playing really serious tricks on him, and he had finally gone crazy. Veering around, he looked for Kit. Nothing.

Chapter Twenty-One

Two souls in one, two hearts into one heart.

~Guillaume du Bartas

The fog parted a little, forming almost a circle, and within the confines, he descried a room full of people. They all watched two more in the center of a colored floor. It was Kit with a large man, who wore nothing but a pair of pants with a black belt. She wore only one more piece of clothing on her top, also white, with a black belt. At once, they both started moving in that strange way she had done around him.

His heart plummeted.

She was in a battle, fighting. He stepped forward, but the vision faded. Teasing him. Taunting him. He could do nothing to protect her. Helpless and angry, he staggered back, not sure how to handle this. He bumped into Ares, whose solid form offered up silent support. Ares helped banish the chill of the night and allowed his mind to wander to pleasanter memories.

Marcus gazed forward, and the vision came back into focus. This time, a large group of people surrounded Kit with smiles on their faces. The joy shared among them obvious. Kit's exhaustion was there, but she retained a glow about her that bespoke of satisfaction.

When the hugging began, Marcus shut his eyes, not wishing to see her in another's arms. Not that it did him any good, for he could still envision her body in perfect detail. Her long lashes, the smoky color her eyes turned when she was aroused; he could even hear her panting breath as she found her release in his arms.

What is wrong with me? Why can't I let this go?

Unsure of the wisdom of his decision but fueled by a need he had no answer to resolving, he grabbed up the thick mane of the black stallion and swung aboard Ares' broad back. The moment he settled, Ares reared up, striking out at the fog with his front legs. Marcus held on to this last link he had to Kit. The horse's volleying challenge tore across the meadow seconds before he dropped his legs and sprung away like a hunting hawk stooping into a dive after its prey.

They ran hard, covering extensive tracts of land in a short time. Ahead, Marcus saw a scene he'd never seen before—fields with

herds of horses and cattle, while in the background, there were three looming mountains. The sun was shining on a sign over the road.

The Thorne Ranch.

Marcus felt Ares gather himself, snapping his attention from the fading vision. He saw, in the moonlight, they neared a cliff, the same one this horse had gone over the first day Marcus had seen him. The very first day he'd met Kit. Delving his fingers tighter into the thick mane, he urged him on. "Go, Ares," he chanted as the edge neared. "Go!"

The stallion soared off the edge with no hesitation, and that was all Marcus knew.

αβ

Wyoming

"That was a wonderful party, honey."

"I know, Mom. Thanks for having it for us." Kit smiled at her mother as they cleaned up after the party celebrating her twins' six-month birthday. Her babies were currently being entertained by their grandfather. She just shook her head in amusement. He spoiled her kids like nothing she had ever seen.

She currently taught at the university while also working at the ranch, helping her parents.

Her own horse venture was faring pretty well; she was making a name for herself with Ares and the other Friesians she had gotten. Her children had their own horses, already, courtesy of her parents. Morgans. And she had pictures of the equines in their bedroom.

Kit checked the time and swallowed her curse. "I have to get going or I'm going to be late for my lecture." After she showered and dressed, she headed out once she kissed her babies goodbye.

Her parents were going to keep her babies tonight since she was not sure when she would get home. She waved at them from her pickup as she drove away. All in all, her life was pretty good.

Her mind wandered as she drove to the university, and she, once again, found herself dwelling over the memory of a man who continued to haunt her dreams. She had been so careful not to go and peruse through history to see what happened to him. Kit wasn't sure she wanted to know. If he'd married, had children. No, it wasn't what she wanted to learn. This way, he was still hers in the privacy of her mind. Memories no one could take from her, no one could corrupt. She saw him every day when she looked at their

children.

The musical ring of her cell phone broke through her troubled thoughts and the crooning country song that was playing on the radio. “Lawson.”

There was no response. “Hello? Is someone there?” Still nothing. The phone went dead.

Kit shrugged and dropped the phone as she urged her truck faster. She pulled into the university parking lot with moments to spare. Turning off the ignition, she hopped out then locked the truck. She jogged inside the lecture hall, waving at some of her colleagues, caught up to them and entered with them.

The lecture was scheduled to last four hours. It lasted six. Answering some last-minute questions as she began to make her way out of the hall, Kit fought a yawn. She was wiped, and she still had a long drive ahead of her to get home. Stopping by a table, she watched some of the people leaving the room, students and colleagues alike, not really paying attention.

Her gaze halted on a tall man by the door on the other side of the room. Although he was in with a group of people, he stood alone. There was something predatory about him that screamed aloofness. Danger. He was tall, and his black hair disappeared below the collar of his shirt. His physique did unmentionable things to her insides, he was clean-shaven and nicely tanned. A black shirt covered wide shoulders and a narrow waist. His khakis didn’t hide the strength in his legs.

Damn!

“Gorgeous, isn’t he?” Sara, a fellow professor, spoke in hushed tones as she came up beside Kit. “I noticed him after you started speaking. I don’t think he took his eyes off you the whole time. Do you know him? If you do, can I meet him? Can I have him? If I didn’t know better, I would say he is still staring at you. Look at that look. Damn, girl, I am surprised you aren’t going up in flames. Or being put into lockdown. It’s like he thinks he owns you. His look could set stone on fire; I am not the only one who noticed, either. Here comes Jase.” Her friend smothered a laugh as another colleague came up.

Lordy, she can talk. Kit turned to look at the man just joining them.

Jase—Jason Turner. She had long gotten used to his episodes of jealousy and recognized he wasn’t happy when he saw the

smoldering look she kept getting from that stranger in the back of the room. She rolled her eyes and tamped down her irritation at his behavior.

He'd been after her for a date ever since she'd come to the university, nonplussed by her refusals.

"Kit. Sara." He slid his arm around Kit's waist. "Let me walk you out. There seem to be some strangers around, and I wouldn't want you to be in danger."

Sara laughed outright at that. Kit bit the inside of her lip to keep from joining her. She was more than capable of taking care of herself. All of them knew it.

"Thanks, Jason, but I have some more things to take care of here, first, with Sara before I go. You go on. I will see you later this week." She moved away from his hold and grabbed her friend's hand.

"You are so right," Sara chimed in, without missing a beat. "Bye, Jase. See you later." Sara walked with Kit away from the frustrated young man. Stopping Kit, Sara asked, "Who is that guy by the door? Level with me, Kit." Serious, for once, Sara forced an eye connection. Kit could see the worry in her gaze.

"I don't know." She shrugged.

"Well, I think he feels he most certainly knows you. When Jason touched you, I waited for the actual flames to shoot out of his eyes, smoke from his ears, that kind of thing. His hands were clenched, and he looks very dangerous. Should we call security?"

Her friend always meant the best, and as godmother to Kit's babies, she took protecting all of them seriously.

Squeezing Sara's hand, she smiled her thanks. "Not necessary. But, thank you for caring." Sara was her one true friend and confidant. Shaking her head, Kit looked back over across the room. He remained there, staring at her. That stance, that face. That body. That stare. A shiver ran down her spine as her legs turned to jelly. Kit glanced down at hands that were shaking, and she fought to regain her composure.

"Kit? Are you all right, hon? Sit here for a minute. You look like you've seen a ghost. Wait here; I will get you some water." Sara disappeared in a flash.

Kit swept the room with nervous eyes and found the man gone. Kit waited there until Sara returned with some water. They were among some of the last ones to leave the hall, and Sara walked with

her to her truck. "Are you sure you will be okay? Maybe you shouldn't drive all that way alone. Do you want to come home with me?"

"I'll be fine. I have to get home to the kids. I think I have just been working too much, and that's why I'm tired. With the party today and the lecture, as well, I think I'm just exhausted. I'll be fine. Thanks, hon. You're the greatest friend anyone could have." With a hug for her friend, Kit climbed up into her truck to head for home.

Unbeknownst to Kit, hidden by the shadows, a pair of green eyes smoldered with longing and barely restrained passion as they watched Kit hug her friend and turn to step up into a dark blue truck. When the wind blew through the parking lot, making her duster flap around her legs, his heart caught in his throat.

She pulled into her parent's drive a little past midnight. The lights were on, and she knew her parents would be waiting for her. With a yawn and the door closing silently behind her, she patted the head of Coffee, one of her mom's many dogs, as she entered the foyer and headed for the living room. Both her parents were awake, sitting in front of the fire, each reading something different. A crib sat by the edge of the couch, and she knew her babies were sleeping in there.

"What are y'all doing awake?" she asked in a low voice, checking on her kids. Unable to look without touching, she smoothed their hair back.

"Waiting for you to get here. Are you staying here or are you going to take them home? You should stay here since they are already sleeping." Her mom rose to kiss her on the cheek.

"We'll stay. I had a really long meeting and would love to get some shut eye." She picked up Marc while her father picked up Evie. Following her up the stairs, he helped her lay them in their cribs upstairs. "Thanks, Daddy."

"No problem. I love helping with them. They are wonderful kids, baby girl."

"I know, Daddy. Thanks." She pushed up to kiss him on the cheek and led the way out of the nursery into the darkened hallway.

As they split to go in opposite directions, her father stopped and looked back at her. "Baby girl?"

"What is it?"

"Someone called for you today. About breeding a mare of his to

Ares. He said he wished to see him in person, first, and would be out tomorrow to do so. Around noon. I brought Ares over here since we counted on you staying the night.”

“Thanks.” She opened the door to her room and asked, as an afterthought, “Did he leave a name?”

“Quinn, I think he said. From Blackthorne Farms.”

Quinn. Blackthorne. No way. Knees trembling as she struggled for breath, she forced herself into the bedroom on weak legs. Mind running a hundred miles per minute, she tried unsuccessfully to bring herself under control. *Was it possible? Of course not.* Her emotions in turmoil, she finally fell asleep to dreams haunted by a legendary knight with vivid green eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Love will find a way

~Anonymous

The morning arrived way too quickly. Kit left her children with her mother as she began work in the barns. She stopped to say good morning to her stallion as he played out in a corral, away from the others.

Around half past ten, a car pulled into the drive. Sara and Jason got out. Inwardly smothering a groan at the sight of Jason, Kit went to meet them.

“Came to check on you.” Jason announced as he leaned in to give her a kiss on the lips. At the last moment, she turned her head so it landed on her cheek.

Sara rolled her eyes and grinned. “I was drug along. Now that I’m here, I’m going to see my godchildren.” Sara winked at Kit as she hurried over to where her children were in their playpen outside in the late autumn sun.

She’s going to be a good mom when the time comes. Sara planted kisses on both babies before settling them back.

“I have a horse to work with, Jason. Excuse me. If you want to help, find my dad. I am sure he will have something for you to do.” She walked off, knowing that all he would do was follow her. Jason was not for physical labor. Sure, he did the gym thing, but that was the extent of his willingness to do anything physical. The man just did not like to get dirty. Which, in hindsight, would be fine; her father wouldn’t have allowed him to work near the horses, anyway.

Kit went to Ares and was putting him through his paces before the man came to see him. She wanted him to be warmed up first. While she worked the horse, Jason leaned on the fence and watched her.

A black three-quarter ton truck pulled up into the drive around noon, and a stout man got out of the driver’s side. He appeared around forty and had the weathered face of a man who had worked outside his whole life. He approached Kit with her father’s foreman, Alex Ross. His stride was slightly bowlegged, but she immediately took a liking to him. He gave off this presence that set her at ease.

“Ms. Lawson, this is Ned Quinn. He comes from Blackthorne Farms.”

A fast breath whooshed out of her lungs. This Mr. Quinn she could handle. All her worrying and anxiety were for naught. Relief and something else, sadness, swept over her.

"Thanks, Alex. Mr. Quinn. It's a pleasure to meet you. Let me just unhook Ares here then we can talk, and you can take a look at him."

Kind but shrewd blue eyes met hers. "I think I should tell you now that my boss wants to breed to this horse, no matter what. The main thing is that his mare's papers are acceptable to you. He's willing to pay whatever you request. I was also required to tell you this up front. He wants no surprises. He wants a colt out of your Ares."

"Your boss? " Her curiosity grew leaps and bounds with this mysterious man who seemed so determined to have her stud for his mare. *I thought this was the man I was going to be dealing with. Maybe things won't be so bad, then, if he has a boss and his name is Quinn. I can handle this.*

"Your horse is very well known, ma'am. I have the papers on his mare, right here."

Kit turned Ares loose in the pen and climbed out between the rails. Shucking her gloves, she tucked them in the back pocket of her jeans. Kit shook his hand before taking the papers he stretched out to her. Kit opened the folder and, with a quick once-over of the papers, dropped the whole thing.

On the top page sat the embossed name, Blackthorne Farms, and alongside it, was a raised sword with a rope of thorns circling it four times. It was set on the backdrop of a sapphire blue oval. She knew that symbol. She wore it *every single day*.

Both of them knelt down to gather the papers. "I'm so sorry, sir, I don't know what happened." Her breath came sharp and fast. This couldn't be happening to her. Not now. This had to be a dream, or a nightmare. *So much for thinking I'm in the clear, here.*

"No harm done, Ms. Lawson. Do you feel all right? Perhaps, you would like to sit down, and we can go over the papers later."

"Now will be sufficient. I'm fine. Will I get the chance to meet your boss? I like to meet the people that my horses will be going to or that have use of my services." Struggling to keep her head, she fought down the tremors running rampant through her body.

"My employer doesn't go to very many places, but he may make an exception for you."

Kit stood, papers gathered and in hand. She leaned on the fence, propped one foot on a rail, and scanned the papers, trying desperately *not* to notice the emblem at the top.

Jason came over to stand next to her and put his arm around her.

“Jase, knock it off. This is business.” She shrugged, ridding herself of his touch. *Looks like he and I will be having a chat on proper behavior.* They weren’t a couple, and he hadn’t any right to do that sort of thing in front of others. Especially when it was a potential client.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as Jason moved away from her. His reason for putting even more distance between them not relevant in her world. What was, the feelings coursing through her. With several deep breaths, she lowered her foot from the rail and inched around to check the reason for the bundle of nerves exploding in her gut. Taking her time, she searched for any fragment of fortitude left after that initial feeling.

Kit kept her gaze fixated on the ground until she could see boots. Her focus started at the feet of the person coming toward her. Man. Walking was absolutely not the right word in any way, shape or form. This man did not merely walk. He stalked. Prowled. Glided. Pursued. Walk, he did not. He was moving stealthily toward them.

He wore no coat, despite the chill in the air, and his clothes fit him like a second skin. He wore short sleeves that showed off pronounced muscles. Sleek, deadly and maintaining a very predatory and possessive gleam in his eyes. If a black panther were ever to take human form, this is how he would look.

Dusty black cowboy boots covered the feet. Faded black jeans, almost indecently tight, covered rock-hard thighs like they were shrink-wrapped, and did nothing to conceal the impressive muscles that moved beneath the material. A black t-shirt, tucked in at a lean waist, was stretched tightly over a torso she surely could have bounced not only a quarter off of but also a dollar bill.

His pecs and abs were more than visible; his shirt outlined them in great detail. His biceps flexed as he kept curling his hands into fists. The muscular body came to a halt in front of her and waited. Commanded her to look up at him. All without him saying a single word.

Arms were of corded steel and bronzed by the sun, with a

dusting of black hair on them. Upon the inky black shirt, she noticed a gold chain that supported a plain silver band. She knew that ring, for at one time in her life, it had belonged to her. She had lost it in a different place and time. A familiar scent flooded her senses—sandalwood, leather and a scent that, no matter how hard she looked, she would never find in a bottle, for it belonged to one man solely.

Her world shifted, violently, and she struggled to maintain her upright position. Surely, this couldn't be. Could it?

Kit inhaled deeply, moving upward with her perusal, slowly as if the man himself would disappear if she looked too fast, but at the same time, unable to ignore his silent command. His face. Hauntingly familiar. Those same angular lines, the same straight nose, lean desirable lips, strong chin. The eyes. They were that same lustrous green that haunted her dreams. A lock of black hair fell over one eye. She ached to reach up and move it.

Marcus.

Marcus had gotten out of the vehicle when he saw that pale excuse of a man put a skinny arm around his woman, for the second time. He'd been sitting in the truck, attempting to gather his nerve. He soaked up the extraordinary view Kit offered to his gaze. He had been unable to approach her at her meeting nor had he been able to speak to her on the phone when he'd called her. The shock at seeing her in person, after all that time, was almost too overwhelming for him. Not anymore. Now, it was time for him to reclaim what was his.

Kit still made him lose his breath. Casually dressed in a long-sleeved, light green shirt with the top two buttons undone, she unwittingly gave those around her a teasing and altogether tantalizing view if they cared to look. Fitted blue jeans, complemented by old and worn cowboy boots on her feet, completed the very desirable picture she presented. She'd been working with Ares when Ned approached. And Marcus knew the moment she saw his seal, for she dropped the papers all over the ground, and her breathing became hitched. His own had done the same thing the first time he'd seen her, again. However, it was just too much for him to handle when that man came up and touched her.

Marcus strode over to them, his intentions crystal clear to those present. Feeling everyone else's gazes on him did nothing to stop

him. He had searched high and low for her. Hell, he had traveled through centuries to find her, again. Nothing was going to stop him, now.

Until she turned and faced him. It was like running into a stone wall. It smacked the momentum out of him like nothing else could. The captivating power of her silver eyes on his body held him immobile as she looked him over. Slowly, she moved her gaze up his body. He stood, waiting for the second when their eyes would meet, again.

Marcus hadn't been sure what happened after Ares had jumped off the cliff, but he'd awoken and found himself work on a horse ranch. Eventually, after selling some of his jewels, he'd bought his own ranch. It had taken some time to learn these strange customs, but he'd adapted fairly quickly. He now claimed ownership to a very successful horse ranch and had come for the one thing that he still needed in his life.

Katrina.

Kit felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her. Here she stood staring into the eyes of the love of her life. The father of her children, the one her very soul cried out for. Had done so since she left him. And she couldn't move. He was here. It was as if time remained motionless for them.

"My lady."

Her body trembled like a leaf on a stormy night at those words. That timbre. After all the nights she'd conjured it up in her mind, nothing was like the real thing. She blinked rapidly as if he were a hallucination and would just disappear.

Kit pulled herself together and stepped toward him. Her gaze never once wavering from his, she reached up and brushed back the lock of hair that had fallen forward.

"Marcus?" She couldn't ignore the husky tone of her voice, nor the question she couldn't quite hide.

"Aye. I'm here."

Kit closed her eyes against the wave of emotions that surged through her body at the sound of that voice, that deep baritone slipping over her body like a warm embrace. *I made it back to his time and back home; why can't I accept he found a way here?*

Kit reopened her eyes to witness him raising his hands to her face. He skimmed them, roughened from years of wielding a sword, over her silken skin, both of them trembling from the contact.

“My fierce one.” Marcus lowered his head, gently brushed his lips over hers, and she savored the feel of his lips on hers, once again.

At the first touch of his lips, Kit fell into him, grabbing at his shirt with shaking hands. The papers she had been reviewing fell forgotten to the ground. She moaned into his kiss as she climbed as close as she could to him. His tongue ran around her lips and coaxed them to open.

It wasn't enough.

And yet, it was too much.

A low growl generating in his throat, Marcus swept her up in his strong arms, never once removing his mouth from hers until her feet had completely left the ground. She wound her arms around his neck, fingers threading into thick hair and anchoring them together as she answered his growl with one of her own.

Finally releasing his grip on her, both lips and arms, Marcus slid her down his hard body, bringing to her attention another part of his anatomy that responded to her. She trembled with desire as she released a shuddering breath, knowing that he felt the same passion she did. Winding her arms around him, she inhaled his scent. It was too much. She began to cry.

Marcus tipped up her face and wiped away her tears with his thumbs. “Don’t cry. I’m here, now.”

“How did you get here? Can you stay or do you have to leave?” Her questions were muffled into his chest, and even as they fell from her lips, she wasn’t sure she could withstand hearing him say he was going to have to leave.

Marcus swept her back up in his arms and strode over to the table under a tree. She still weighed next to nothing in his mind. He sat her the edge of the table before he stepped back to look and meet her gaze.

God, I missed those eyes. “I’m not sure how I came to be here. Ares is the only thing I’m sure of. I have to stay. You see, I traveled all these years to be with a special woman that had stolen my heart. Without her, I am only a shell of a man. I need her to make me happy; I need her to love me. I need her to marry me.” He dropped to one knee in front of her.

As always, aware of his surroundings, he heard the gasps from those observing them, but he didn’t care. This had to be taken care of, first. Marcus took her wobbly hand in his as he kept his gaze on

her face.

“When I lost you the first time, I ran. Everywhere I looked you were there. I saw visions of you every time I closed my eyes. I tried to put myself into harm’s way, hoping that maybe I would be free of the pain your absence put in my heart. Nothing worked. The king married me to Clarissa.” He ignored her gasp and gripped her hand tighter so she couldn’t pull away. “Our marriage was consummated only because she entered my chamber and took advantage of me during a dream I was having of you. We can just say that I was more than up to the challenge, and when I realized that it wasn’t you, I awoke completely. I left that very night. I didn’t give her children; I refused to do so.

“Duncan and Hugh both got married. They were happy; I was still miserable. One night, three years later, I saw Ares. I jumped on his back and... Well, to make a long story short, I’m here, now. I’ll stay here. I’ll go wherever you wish me to. Please. Please, don’t make me spend any more time without you in my life. I traveled across centuries to be with you. I love you, Katrina. Will you stay with me until the end of our days? Will you marry me?”

“Yes. Oh, God, yes!” She launched herself from the table into his embrace, the force of her jump knocking him back. He sat there on the ground with her, just holding her. Marcus savored the feel of her body next to his. A loud whinny reached them, and they both looked up to see Ares rearing up and neighing.

Marcus’ senses were on overdrive. The smells, the feelings—it was almost too much. He struggled to regain his control.

The soft pliant woman in his arms stiffened, and he looked at her, concerned about the expression on her face. He lifted a brow.

“Um, Marcus. I have something to tell you.”

Not sure how to handle the nervous emotion in her voice, he held her tighter and waited for her to continue.

“Well, it’s like this. When I left your time and came back to mine, I wasn’t... Well, I wasn’t exactly alone.”

“Who was with you?” Marcus knew Gavin and Mary had both been left in his time.

“Marcus and Ebonee.” Rising from his secure embrace, she pulled him up beside her. Heading toward the porch, she kept a firm grasp on his hand.

Marcus and Ebonee? Who were they? For the life of him, he could not place their names. Marcus was his name.

He followed her up a few steps stairs and through the group of gawking people. He stopped so not to run her over and looked over her shoulder down into a crib. There were two babies in there. They slept in the late autumn sun in the way safe children did. Realization dawned, and he looked down at her in shock.

“Mine?” he whispered as he looked at them in awe.

“Ours.” Her fingers tightened on his. She gave him a smile that warmed his heart before continuing. “That is Marcus Kevyn, called Marc. His sister is named Ebonee Victoria; we call her Evie. ”

His face was going to break, his smile was so big. He tentatively reached out to touch his son, his heir. The one she called Marc, but before he could, baby Ebonee woke up and stared at him with eyes identical to his own. His breath caught in his throat. She was so beautiful and so fragile looking. She cooed at him before she reached up her arms. Like he was touching a breakable item, he slowly picked her up, heedless of the tears that streamed down his face. He didn’t want to damage her.

Ebonee blinked trustingly up at her father with clear green eyes, and when she wrapped her tiny golden hand around one of his large fingers, he was lost. Ignoring the rest of the people on the porch, he sat in a chair and just stared down at his daughter. His daughter. “How old is she...are they?” he quickly amended.

“Six months.”

Kit picked up her son and sat next to their father, and the look in her eyes told Marcus how much he was loved. Soon, their daughter fell asleep, and he just held her in his arms. With a sidelong glance over at the woman who had given him this joy, he noticed her smile as she rocked their son. He let his eyes roam over her as she remained oblivious to his perusal of her body.

Her face was fuller. Her breasts, larger. Her body was, without doubt, curvier. Marcus undeniably approved of these changes. Her shirt, open at the top, allowed him to peer down it, which he did shamelessly. His eyes riveted to her breasts, full with the milk that nourished his children. A tightening in his pants made him rise with his daughter, and he placed her back in the crib.

Marcus stood over Kit and waited until she raised her head. Not saying anything, just waiting for her to figure out what he wanted, he watched as dawning hit her. Her eyes grew dark and smoky. She got to her feet, laying Marc back by his sister.

“Where is your room?”

“Upstairs, third door on the right.” Her voice made huskier by desire.

Marcus swung her up in his arms and strode in through the door like he owned the place. Halfway up the stairs, Kit yelled over her shoulder, “Mom?”

“Don’t worry, honey. We got the children. Don’t worry about us. We will be at your house.”

Marcus kicked the door shut behind him and dropped her on the bed. He crushed her into the mattress as he rained kisses all over her face. Her shirt ripped in his rush.

“You. You were the reason I kept going. You, my fierce one. The need, the ache, the desire to be with you, again. We were destined by the heavens to be together. A lifetime. To touch you and feel you next to me, once again, I have waited. I waited lifetimes to hold you in my arms, again.”

“And I, you. I love you, Marcus. Love me, Marcus, it has been so long.” She panted with need. As did he.

The clothes quickly disappeared, and Marcus’ breath hitched in his throat as he gazed at the woman lying in all her naked splendor on the bed beneath him. Waiting for him. Her arms rose in invitation, and he accepted. It had been far too long.

Nudging her legs apart, he slipped his large hands under her hips and raised her slightly to his cock. His shaft jerked and leaped as her velvety warmth started to enclose it. He could go slowly no more than he could stop the sun from setting. He slid his entire length in her depths in one stroke, groaning from the waves of ecstasy that swept his body as her heat enfolded him. She was so tight her body just fit around him perfectly. It was heaven to be joined with her, once again.

“Ohhh, Marcus.”

Her voice made him lose the little thread of control he had. He was starving for this woman, and she was for him. This was not the time for slow lovemaking. This was people eating at a feast. At the same instant, this was more than just sex. Their souls were joining. Finally, after searching across centuries of time, they would meld and be forever united as one person, one soul, and one love.

“I love you,” he groaned, moving faster and faster within her.

Her hips rose and fell, urging him on. She encouraged him with whimpers and groans. Finally, she peaked, and when she tightened her muscles around his penis, he slammed home deep within her

and screamed her name as he came hard inside her body.

Marcus collapsed on top of her, struggling to capture his breath. His heart was pounding so fast he thought he might pass out. Placing his sweat-covered forehead on hers, he looked at her and smiled.

Kit ran her tongue over his upper lip. She moved on to his lower one and bit it gently before sucking on it to take the pain away.

Marcus felt himself stirring, again. Rolling off of her, he stopped her hands. "Slowly, this time. We have the rest of our lives."

"It takes time to plan a wedding."

He snorted. "Fierce one. In my eyes, we are already married. We have been since the beginning of time. We were born to be with each other. We were destined to be together. Nothing will change that. Not now, not ever." He ran his hand down her face, caressing her. Only his eyes betrayed the calmness of his words. They challenged her to defy him, he knew it. They were the eyes of the warrior she had fallen in love with, domineering and overbearing. His eyes told a completely different story—they claimed her and said that nothing would keep them apart again. They were one.

"I missed this." Her hands went lower. "I missed you." Her fingers curled around his rapidly thickening shaft. "This. I definitely missed this." Pushing him on his back, she rode him and administered to him in the tenderest way she could. There was no anger or questions about whether or not they had been with others during their time apart, for it mattered not. They had found each other, again, and that was what mattered.

Later on in the afternoon, they made love once more. When early evening arrived, she rose, and they took a hot shower in her parents' master bath.

"What's wrong?" Marcus asked as he walked up behind her.

"I hurt, Marcus; I have to get to the children."

"Where do you hurt?" Even after all those centuries, he was still a warrior, and her cry made him tense and ready to battle on her behalf. Marcus spun her around to look down into her tear-stained face. Spotting the wetness on her shirt, he figured out the problem. He led her to the bed and sat her up against the headboard. Swiftly, he unbuttoned her shirt and carefully took her swollen breasts out of her bra.

Emitting little cries of pain caused just by his touch, Kit sat as still as she could. When his mouth closed over one, she jumped at

the initial onslaught of surprise. He turned his attention to her other breast and suckled that one, as well, down to a much smaller size.

Marcus was getting extremely aroused by suckling on his wife. He knew he was helping with her pain, but there was just something about doing this to a wife that was extremely stimulating. The stiffness in his pants proved it.

A powerful need grew within her. She brushed the hair of her husband as he suckled at her chest and watched as he grew hard in his pants. When he was finished, she rolled him over and, without closing up her shirt, glanced up at him from lowered lashes and said, "You took care of my pain, let me lessen yours for you." She slid down and took him in her mouth, keeping him there, resisting his frantic pulling, until his salty essence flowed into her throat and was swallowed.

The following morning, she took Marcus over to her house to introduce him to her parents. Together, they walked into her house. Her parents were eating breakfast, and her babies were on a blanket on the floor.

"Mom, Dad. I would like you to meet Marcus." Turning to the tall man next to her, she added, "Marcus. These are my parents, Kevin and Halla."

Marcus walked over to her mother, took her hand and, slanting a wink at Kit, kissed her hand and offered Halla a bow that he'd definitely learned in the king's court. "Milady. It is truly, truly an honor to meet you. I see, now, where your daughter gets her rare and delicate beauty."

Another fleeting kiss on her hand, and he smoothly rose. Her mom had flushed cheeks, which was rare, since she was rarely embarrassed by anything.

Approaching her father, Marcus offered another bow. "Sir. A pleasure." Finished, he stepped back by Kit and brushed a kiss on her neck before he sat on the edge of the blanket and became totally engrossed in his children.

"Milady?" Her father growled.

Kit wrapped an arm around his waist. "Daddy. Please. I love him."

"I know, baby girl. When is the wedding?" His voice softened.

"As soon as possible."

"Tomorrow. I'll see to everything." He kissed his daughter then headed to the door. As he passed the twins on the floor, he paused

when Marcus spoke to the babies.

"I'm your father. I made a vow to your momma, a long time ago, to return to her. No matter what, I'm going to spend the rest of my life making up my lost time to all of you." He picked up his daughter and gently brushed a thick black lock off her forehead. Rocking her to his chest, he whispered, "I will always take care of you, baby girl. I will always be here for you."

Kevin patted Marcus on the shoulder and left with his wife. Kit stood there and watched her family.

Marcus stood and handed Evie to his wife-to-be and picked up his son. Turning to her, he said, "Show me your home. Show me *our* home. I'll not be separated from you, again. I'm moving my ranch up here. Whatever it takes for us to be a family." His words touched her deeply.

Kit took them upstairs, and when she got to her bedroom, Marcus noticed the large four-poster bed. With a wicked smile, he waggled his eyebrows at her. "Nice bed." He grinned at the memory of her first glimpse of his bed in his castle and her less-than-lady-like response to it.

Her body reacted immediately to his voice, the telltale jump at the pulse in her throat and the dilation of her eyes. "I think so. I think I will have many happy memories in it." Her smile was just as sinful and lusty as his.

"I know you will."

"Their room is down the hall." She led the way to the twins' room. It was a cheerful room. Medium-sized and painted in pale yellow with pasties of barnyard animals, clouds and sunshine all over the walls. The ceiling had the moon and stars. The furniture was made of maple and was light in coloring. The headboard of Marc's crib had the sun etched in, while the crescent moon was carved on Evie's. They lay them in their cribs, and Marcus wrapped his arms around Kit as they stood there looking at their children.

"They are absolute perfection. I'm so proud of you." His voice said that much and more.

"Marcus," she said, spinning in his arms until she faced him. "Thank you. Thank you for coming back to me."

"Oh, my fierce one, how could I not? I gave you my vow." He ran his hands under her shirt to cup her breasts as he flicked his thumbs over the ends, causing them to tighten with desire, only to continue on to mold his hands to her face. Marcus leaned his head

down. He nibbled on the sensitive spot behind her ear, causing her breath to quicken. "You know a knight must *always* keep his vow."

"Really. In that case, I am pretty sure this knight vowed to..." She turned her head and whispered in his ear.

His throat emitted a low rumble, part desire, mostly predator. Then, he swept her off her feet and carried her back to the bedroom. "Your every wish, my command, milady." He lay her on the bed, removed her clothes and then his.

While their children slept down the hall, the knight once feared throughout all England and beyond, known to many as The Devil, finally discovered where he belonged. Had finally found his way home, into the arms of the only one who could ever chance to tame his love. Tame his heart. His defiant lady of the mist, his fierce one.

That magnificent knight never forgot his vow to his lady, who, in his eyes, was without equal, for the rest of his days. He promised to show her, over and over again, just how much she meant to him, whether it was during the brightest lights of day or in the darkest shadows of night. That he would never let her go, and last, but in no way least, that they truly were destined, by the heavens themselves, to be together, joined as one, for the rest of eternity.

THE END

About the Author:

Aliyah Burke is an avid reader and is never far from pen and paper (or the computer). She loves to hear from her readers and can be reached [here](#). She can also be found on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest.

She is married to a career military man. They are owned by four Borzoi. She spends her days sharing time between work, writing, and dog training.

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A Love for Lera
Rakes & Rogues
What the Earl Desires
Her Reluctant Viscount
Her Pirate Rogue
Cottonwood Falls
Relentless
Fracture
Ravish
Spark
Savor
Intensity
Inferno
Snake's Salvation
Tryst with the CEO
Brodie's Wish
Operation Ball N' Chain

Springwood
The Wedding Snafu
The Billionaire's Code
Delay of Game (coming 2 Sep 19)
Born to Fly
Landing in Love
You Save Me
Wild As The Wind
Zulu Spectre
Hearth, Holly, & Honor (3 in 1)
It Could Happen Again
Tungsten Protective Services
Down Range
All In
His Rysk to Take
His Pryze to Claim
Tatra Pack
Say You're Mine
Whispered Loyalties
Twisted E-Publishing
Under the Mask
May You Always
Code Name: Sleeper
One Cold Night
D.A.R.K., INC
Breaking All the Rules
Trust Me
Handling the Perks
The Second Time Around
Graham Family
Justice Is Always Ready
And We've Come Full Circle
Kendrick Brothers
It Was Always You
Drunk on You
Belongs to You
Denim & Spurs
With This Ring

Dream Lover
You Don't Know Jack
Maddox Family
The Detective's Lover
Quad Series
A Little Taste of Home
Too Dangerous To Love
Someday My Prince Good Ol' Boy Will Come
Black Queen
Beyond His Control
Totally Bound
Preconception
Seducing Damian
Through the Fire
Serial
Keeper of the Stars Pt. 1
Keeper of the Stars Pt. 2
Keeper of the Stars Pt. 3
Keeper of the Stars Pt. 4
Keeper of the Stars Pt. 5
Astral Guardians
Chasing the Storm
Highlands at Dawn
Fields of Thunder
Branded by Frost
Driven by Night
Moon of Fire
Boxset part 1 (Books 1-3)
Boxset part 2 (Books 4-6)
Interludes
Temporary Home
Alone with You
Till We Ain't Strangers Anymore
In Aeternum
Casanova in Training
Harbour of Refuge
Protected by Shadows
Polar Opposites

Code of Honour
A Marriage of Convenience
The Lieutenant's Ex-Wife
A Man Like No Other
When Stars Collide

Theta Corps
Retaliation
Contrition
Vindication
The Edge
Called Home to The Edge
Straying to The Edge
Returning Home to The Edge
Cuffed at The Edge
The Monroe Sisters
Need You Now
Let Me Go
I Won't Say Goodbye
Entangled
Code Name: Papa
Standalone
Dutch & Lobo (in In the Trenches collection)
Love Under the Endless African Sky
Co-written with Taige Crenshaw
Unbreakable Bonds
Kemet Uncovered:
Talios
Devi
Linc
Saffron
Taber
Ashia
Co-written with McKenna Jeffries
Wicked Burn
McKingley:
All the Wright Moves

The Best Thing Yet
Risky Pleasures
Pure Harmony
Irresistible Forces
Seductions Dance